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Cover
Karhryn Jacobi
The Tink-tonk of the Rain
from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” XIV
Introduction

Natalie Gerber

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds
Not often realized, the lighter words
In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music
In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window
When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the sea,

Flickings from finikin to fine finikin
And the general fidget from busts of Constantine
To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank,

These are the edgings and inching of final form,
The swarming activities of the formulae
Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at. . . .
—Wallace Stevens

I

In 1991, Jacqueline V. Brogan edited the special Wallace Stevens Journal issue Structures of Sound in Stevens, which first collected attention to the use of sound in Wallace Stevens’ verse. The author of the thoughtful study Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language (1986), Brogan had gathered fine essays that took an admirable range of approaches. Historically and theoretically grounded studies drawing on subjects as diverse as classical verse, foreign etymologies, theories of repetition, and prosodic history were included without neglecting the important testimony of Stevens’ influence upon contemporary poets—both their practice and their lifelong reading of Stevens. The mere appearance of the issue was cause for rejoicing to scholars of Stevens and of poetics sensitive to the materiality of language and its centrality in Stevens’ poetry.

Brogan’s careful editorial efforts had accomplished even more than might be apparent. For this journal issue signalized diverging from a deeply entrenched tradition of Stevens criticism that had veered away from
sound for all the professionally and socially fraught reasons that Alan Fil- 
reis lists in his essay in this 2009 volume: “(1) fear of mannerist reputa-
tion; (2) guilt by association with the non-innovative; (3) Hi Simons; (4) 
Stevens’ dull-seeming poetry readings; (5) a lagging interest among crit-
ics in sound technology; (6) a certain deafness in the project of disclosing 
Stevens’s politics” (15). Beyond all these customary causes for resistance 
lie even more serious obstacles. As the venerable Helen Vendler had com-
mented in her acclaimed study of Stevens’ longer poems, On Extended Wings 
(1969), “[S]ince criticism has yet to find a way of making notes on cadence, 
rhythms, and sounds both reliable and readable, I resort to only occasional 
remarks on these subjects” (9–10). Marjorie Perloff quoted Vendler’s com-
ment in her 1982 essay “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” as emblematic of the 
persistent yet puzzling situation that, “in marked contrast” to criticism on 
Ezra Pound, rarely do the best in Stevens studies deal with his “prosodic 
innovations” (497). These two instances alone could have occasioned the 
rousing call by Eleanor Cook in her introduction to the 1991 issue to attend 
to the “technical,” which includes the central role of sound, in Stevens: “It 
seems especially important at this moment of our critical lives to under-
stand that word ‘technical’ in its fullest sense, to be as fully responsible to 
its demands as any good artist is. Otherwise we lose the life of forms, and 
thereby something of ourselves” (124).

Today, Brogan’s 1991 volume remains invaluable for pointing to impor-
tant sound patterns and phenomena in Stevens—those that once appeared 
in criticism erratically, but now are central topics when we talk about 
sound in Stevens. These include his use of natural and animal sounds, his 
irruptive delight in the sound(s) of words themselves, his use of nonsense 
words and syllables, and his fascination with non-referential aspects of 
words (e.g., their etymologies and their derivations from foreign cognates 
with distinctive phonological structures). They also include the distinctive 
sounds of the poems themselves, characterized as they are by Stevens’ in-
sistent repetition and variation of lexical materials. The sounds of the early 
poems are characterized by his explosive play with phonological pattern-
ings such as phonemes and syllables, while the late poems are character-
ized more by the repetition, anaphora, and modulation of words, phrases, 
and propositions that mimic or simulate the content of a mind sorting 
itself out, or a will testing out different stances toward reality.

In retrospect, we might see the 1991 special issue as also being in the 
vanguard of a renewed interest in sound in Stevens. The well had not, 
per se, run dry in the 1980s, but general prosodic and sonic issues had 
fallen prey to charges of mere aestheticism and to assumptions that for-
malism was somehow immune to (or outside of) the concerns with social 
and political history that dominated the era; and thus efforts in the area 
of sound were limited, or at least perceived as such. Given the currency 
of the academic marketplace, even lauded studies of sound in poetry— 
such as Marie Borroff’s and Eleanor Cook’s extraordinary work on sound
symbolism and wordplay in Stevens—were unlikely or unable to spur a sustained critical trend.

For whatever reason, the period since then has proven more receptive to attention to prosodic and sonic innovations in verse. The Structures of Sound in Stevens was followed over the next five to ten years by Alison Rieke’s *The Senses of Nonsense* (1992), Anca Rosu’s *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens* (1995), and Beverly Maeder’s *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (1999). John N. Serio and B. J. Leggett’s anthology, *Teaching Wallace Stevens* (1994), put prosodic and lexical issues above the fold with much of its second section dedicated to sonic aspects of Stevensian language, including George Lensing’s superb essay, “Stevens’s Prosody,” which helped to attune readers’ ears to Stevens’ considerable rhythmic, intonational, and metrical effects and their relationship to his diction. Since 2001, there have been more than a dozen essays just in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* explicitly addressing various musical, linguistic, and prosodic aspects of sound in Stevens. (By contrast, *The Wallace Stevens Journal* from 1981 to 2001 lacks an equal number of essays on these topics if one excludes the 1991 special issue.)

The return to sound in Stevens criticism has happily corresponded with a return to sound in broader critical efforts as well. In 2006, MLA’s then-President Marjorie Perloff’s determination to sustain a meditation on the theme “The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound” renewed scholarly attention to the technical and its significance. Acknowledging that poetry often is discussed in terms of content and not its materiality, she writes, “Yet poetry—which today is largely synonymous with lyric poetry—has always been designed not to deliver messages but to embody what are often conflicting meanings by formal and material means. And here the question of sound structure comes in” (3). At that year’s MLA Convention in Philadelphia more than two dozen scholarly programs and workshops affiliated with the Presidential Forum paid attention to sound. Many of these events included a fresh backward glance at modern figures such as Stevens through the lens of contemporary experimental poets as well as a renewed interest in modern sound technologies and devices. On behalf of the Wallace Stevens Society, Alan Filreis organized a roundtable entitled Sound in Stevens featuring critics and poets alike. Like Stevens’ own predilections for provisional notes or for aphoristic sayings, as in “Adagia” or “Materia Poetica,” these brief position papers were full of important but compressed ideas deserving of fuller explication, such as the poet Peter Gizzi’s statement, “The sound within Stevens’ poems—even if produced in the form of non-semantic sound—becomes increasingly central to the organization of meaning.” The conversation that ensued at this roundtable and elsewhere led to the call for the current special issue. Two of the original position papers also appear in expanded form as full-length scholarly essays herein; the other talks remain tutelary spirits.
Like its 1991 predecessor, this new issue arrives in impeccable company. Recent studies relevant to this topic include *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* (2008), by Stefan Holander; *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (2007), by Eleanor Cook; and the consistent work of many contributors here in individual essays to teasing out particulars of Stevens’ linguistic structures and their relationship to the sounds of words and sounds of music. Beverly Maeder’s brilliant essay “Stevens and Linguistic Structure” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* (2007) is of particular note for its careful attention to the “acoustic and visual materiality of words” (152) and its dazzling display of how such technical choices conspicuously contribute content, ideas, and even a mode of thinking in Stevens’ verse.

As the title to this special issue signals, the essays collected here differ in interesting ways from those in the 1991 volume. There we might say the essays tended toward the collection and taxonomy of sound in Stevens by gathering evidence across the collected works—showing trends over his career and collating remarks in letters and talks—to iterate Stevens’ intentions regarding the use of sound and its effects in his verse. Here, there is a surprising skepticism regarding Stevens’ many and varying recourses to sound. These scholars probe Stevens’ reasons for his investments in sound, searching less for “a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration”¹—as he says in “The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words”—than for historical causality, aesthetic imperative, or social context. They are apt to theorize his use of sound not simply as the irruptive sheer sensuous play that is its own provisional satisfaction in the early work, followed by the more meditative music of the mind in later poems; rather, they critically posit the ebullient sound effects of the early verse as a mode of poetics that might have been, and the meditative sound of the later poems they consider as a strategy of social resistance—to representation, to politics, to exigencies of the occasional poem and/or rhetoric. The essays examine the failures implicit in both early and late modes and renew our acquaintance with sound in Stevens in various ways. Their criticism listens more attentively to “the monotony of monotonies” (551) in Stevens than to the justly celebrated, densely lyrical sound effects. Likewise, they tend to favor less well-known texts or to argue for new interpretations of certain canonical texts based on what is only partially legible about them. In short, as Peter Middleton puts it in his essay, their criticism considers where and when the signification of sound matrices in Stevens fails as well as where and when it works; and these writers are apt to consider the interest that stems from the failure of Stevens’ investment in sound as a mode of belief, instead of investing their own belief in the success of Stevens’ sound symbolism.
These essays also revisit prior articulations of sound as a trope in Stevens, including John Hollander’s idea that Stevens’ entire poetic project is a musical trope. In part, this is a continuing caution against embracing Stevens’ own figures, shown herein to be fanciful or fictive as much as adequate figures for belief. But there is also, in the tradition of Borroff and bolstered by the explosion of linguistics and stylistics over the past quarter century, a terminological sophistication brought to the consideration of sound in poetry with sound in music. Here there is a careful noting of the differences between linguistic structures (the phonemic as well as phonetic values, as succinctly expressed by Reuven Tsur’s important book, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?* [1992]), sonic (i.e., non-linguistic), and musical structures. There is also an important recognition that the equation of poetry and music, a nineteenth-century idea and conventional mode of lyric poetry, is one that Stevens both resists and yields to on occasion. That these essays are more interested in examining the only partially legible Stevens that matters to contemporary poets, as opposed to the densely sonic Stevens of the past, says as much about the contemporary moment as it does about Stevens’ own tongue-in-cheek “invective” against the *swan* songs—i.e., the mellifluous, Tennysonian music under whose spell he, too, intermittently falls.

These essays pay attention not only to sound as vocalizations by human and nonhuman speakers (e.g., the sound of words, preverbal sounds, including onomatopoeia, and the sounds of the earth itself) but also to the content and context of non-source sound(s), what one might call the ambient sounds of modernity itself. These include the continuous stream of sound produced by sound technology as well as the self-consciousness involved in natural sounds—for instance, those of the poet reading his verse—that are being preserved or perhaps mimicked by said technologies. The considerable attention given herein to Stevens’ role in the poetry-reading and poetry-recording circuit coincides with the recent explosion of scholarly investigations of the modernist soundscape, notably, Tim Armstrong’s recent writing, including his essay “Player Piano: Poetry and Sonic Modernity,” among those of others. This attention also reminds us of the legacy of Stevens as public poet—the glaring failures of his readings, his resistance to recording his poetry, and how all these issues might problematize our understanding of Stevens’ recourse to sound as it lies latent on the page versus sound as performance.

In toto, against collections of sound and accounts of the functional value of sound devices, the current volume questions the values and the adequacy of sound(s) in Stevens and how well they serve in his fictions and as figures for belief. The essays of the volume’s first half take up linguistic structures as modes of meaning—or modes disruptive of meaning—across Stevens’ career. Their collective critical attention to major volumes and major poems together constitute a survey of Stevens’ early, middle, and late work. Together they offer reassessments of key poems as well as
reassessments of Stevens’ attitude toward his use of sound, much as the essays in the second half move outward to situate Stevens’ use of sound against the modernist soundscape, here represented by attention to sound technology, live and recorded poetry readings, and other poets’ theories of sound.

III

Filreis’ essay “Sound at an Impasse” serves as an excellent introduction for this volume. Beginning with what might seem a non-starter, i.e., the six compelling reasons for the historical resistance to this topic quoted above, Filreis nonetheless discovers several ways forward from the impasse he identifies. First and foremost, by suggesting how in Stevens “a crucial modulation in the sound of the verse” is “also [a crucial modulation] in the political life of the whole poem” (22), he offers a critical move that makes Stevens’ use of sound relevant to his political and aesthetic stance. The import of this move cannot be overestimated. It not only reconciles the critical trends represented, on the one hand, by Filreis’ own criticism and, on the other, by John Hollander’s acute but often overlooked criticism of Stevens’ verse as a musical trope, but it also pinpoints the pressures that Stevens brings to bear via sonic strategies just at moments of crisis, showing, as Filreis does at great length for the climactic moment of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” that we must forge further into Stevens’ sound to move further into his politics.

Filreis’ specific reasons why the contemporary moment is ripe for a reassessment of sound in Stevens anticipate the issues—sound as a grounds for undoing political and rhetorical figures as much as for conjuring a musical or other trope, sound in relation to sound technologies and the audio-text, sound as a means of pursuing experimental language—raised by other contributions for this issue, including Alison Rieke’s consideration of Stevens’ resistance to rhetoric in “Description Without Place” and the monotony of that text; Tyler Hoffman’s consideration of Stevens’ underwhelming reading style in the context of a historical overview of dominant poetic performance styles; and, most of all, Sam Halliday’s essay proposing how Stevens uses sound to delineate space in ways that are reminiscent not only of sound technology but also of weather science.

The three remaining essays in the first half of the volume share the virtues of Filreis’, fusing theoretical accounts of Stevens’ strategies of sound with admirably close attention to moments of crisis in both Stevens’ poems and Stevens criticism. Beverly Maeder’s essay, “Sound and Sensuous Awakening in Harmonium,” unites careful, elegant attention to Stevens’ sound structures with sustained attention to how these sound structures come to signify his modes of meaning and poetic practice. The bulk of her essay focuses on consonance and anaphora, but these stand more broadly for phonological effects in all lexical positions and for repetition of sounds as anaphoric. Where previous accounts have emphasized the sensuality of
Stevens’ virtuosic effects, Maeder stresses that the sensuality of his dense, self-conscious sound structure also embodies for Stevens both a critique of prior conceptions of poetry, e.g., the sonic excess of late romantic and Victorian verse, and “a poetics that might have been” (25), meaning a poetics that Stevens chooses not to develop. The last third of the essay brings attention to what ultimately does succeed as Stevens’ poetics, situating in its analysis of poems from Ideas of Order and later books a partial “renunciation . . . of the sensuous excitement” (36) that characterizes Stevens’ earlier work in favor of a more elaborate, mediated, and epistemological mode within which “explosions or condensations of kinetic energy gradually become sublimated” (37).

In all of this, what Maeder does exceptionally well is to suggest how Stevens continuously seeks a mode of poetry that is capable of enacting a sensuous awakening in the reader and in the poet himself. She argues persuasively that the sensuous riot of the language must fail Stevens as it cannot escape the limiting conceptions of poetry as an unmediated or imitative embodiment of a natural universe of sound; as such, she invites us to read Harmonium anew as a deliberate quest (with all the likelihood of failure endemic to quest motifs) for a mode of poetry capable of sustaining meaning. When Maeder turns to Stevens’ later poetry, she suggestively correlates these poems’ sonic structures, ones that “call[] for us literally to hear these shifting voice positions as audible speech” (38), with Stevens’ search after “the act of the mind.” These poems’ more complex modes of utterance are mediated by the poet (which also explains in part the repetitive sonic and syntactic structures encountered), and Maeder suggests, through many examples, how these later poems accomplish the poet’s sensuous awakening via the poet’s own ordered words, while leaving room for substantial contributions to be made by further scholarship.

Indeed, Alison Rieke’s careful attention to “Description Without Place” in “The Sound of the Queen’s Seemings in ‘Description Without Place’” provides one satisfactory realization of Maeder’s call for a consideration of how sound works in later Stevens poems. Taking up a text that has frequently been dismissed by critics as a failure in its genre, Rieke intriguingly argues for its at least partial restitution by showing precisely how Stevens’ use of sound resists the “‘pom-pom-pom’” (qtd. on 45) expectations of rhetoric and exigency inherent in the occasional poem and perhaps especially germane to a poem coming in the wake of World War II. In doing so, she demonstrates the considerable payoff of fusing linguistic and generic strategies: Stevens’ less legible deployments of sound provoke new debate about critically well-trod works and invite a modulation of this poem’s critical legacy.

Rieke asks that we reconsider the reception of this poem by theorizing that it is perhaps an intentional failure. She speculates that with this occasional poem Stevens “insists his audiences, those listening and those reading, hear poetic effects at work in ways calling attention to forceful
oddity rather than comforting sonority and graceful ease of expression—the loftier strain of ‘forcible enhancings of transfiguration’ [in Vendler’s words] he found useful in other contexts’’ (45).

Rieke’s arguments regarding the poem’s “disruptive aural unintelligibility” (58) gain depth from the quite particular sonic elements of the poem that she investigates: its incessant lexical repetitions, densely assonant rhymes, and use of odd and unexpected diction as well as of unusual inflectional forms. Yet Rieke’s essay wins over its audience not by merely listing the oddity of these sonic elements but by positing the specific importance of such oddities as a collective figuration of Stevens’ resistance to a notion of objective poetics or linguistic objectivity. For example, Rieke offers a delightful explication of Stevens’ use of swans, comparing some of the most famous examples in the poetic canon to those in the text at hand and in other notable Stevens poems. Indeed, because Rieke is exceptionally careful at connecting her points vis-à-vis this poem to other poems in Stevens’ corpus, she offers through this text (which is a crucial one especially for readers of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”) a look backward and forward within Stevens’ Collected Poems.

As Rieke’s essay demonstrates the critical payoff of considering Stevens’ linguistic strategies in the context of theories of literary genre and canon, Peter Middleton’s shows the considerable benefit of fusing conventional sonic criticism with cultural criticism. His essay, focused on the semantic significance of sound matrices in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” redirects debate from the use of sound as a trope or adequate figure to the reconsideration of sound itself as an expression of fundamental processes. As such, “‘The Final Finding of the Ear’: Stevens’ Modernist Soundscapes” evaluates the adequacy of Stevens’ use of sound as a response to the historical, aesthetic, and social issues facing his and earlier generations.

For Middleton the question is less one of whether or not the semantic significance of Stevens’ sound matrices in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” consistently succeeds (in his estimation, it does not) than one of why Stevens should employ the sound of words as a mode of signification at all. He further considers why we should continue to read the poem once we recognize the shortcomings of this mode of sonic argument, in “which equivalences and transformations based on sound values unfold as if they were extended equations in poetic form” (64). Indeed, his conclusion—that “much of what makes his poetry of continuing interest is actually its failure to make this investment [in sound as a source of value, energy, and significance] fully work” (70)—is striking. Yet Middleton’s most intriguing and, as he recognizes, problematic speculation is that sound in Stevens might be “‘utopic’ in all the senses of that word, with all the insights, risks, and failings that are inherent in such a belief” (81). Whether we agree or not, the proposition invites us to view the strategic use of sound in Stevens as aspe...
consider Stevens’ spectral stances toward the pressures of reality versus the imagination in poems such as “The Snow Man” vs. “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” not as statements of belief but as castings toward a defensible position or a fleeting vision of what might suffice. It is these final points above in Middleton’s argument that bridge the first four essays’ dominant concern with assessing the efficacy of strategies of sound in Stevens with the dominant interest of the second set: that of positioning Stevens’ uses of sound in relation both to poetic tradition and to contemporary sonic phenomena and the modernist soundscape.

IV

Sam Halliday’s essay, “Weather, Sound Technology, and Space in Wallace Stevens,” reconsiders “Stevens’ relation to the wider cultures of sound now increasingly seen as an important feature of early twentieth-century culture” (83). Drawing on such recent criticism, Halliday offers an intriguing provisional taxonomy of the theoretical uses of sound and sound technology in Stevens. His examples compare Stevens’ use of sound to contemporary applications, which include the use of sound to establish spatial orientation and trans-locality; to create a reciprocal social place or unity that transcends the fixed distances of geographical space; and—what becomes the centerpiece of Halliday’s argument—much as sound technology is deployed in meteorological science, “to plot, as much as conquer space, and thus describe, as well as outstrip ‘distances’ ” (89). This equivalence intriguingly connects Stevens’ use of sound—and its relevance to his ideas of “description without place”—with advances in sound technology such as sonar and radar, which the author similarly characterizes as “epistemological tools able to access forms or objects of knowledge inaccessible by other means” (90). Correlations between the tendency of sounds in Stevens’ poetry to “translate[] into and out of other forms, both material and sensory” (90), and the similar principle behind sound reproduction, which involves “the turning of sound into something else and that something else back into sound” (90), lead to interesting parallels between the role of sound reproduction in weather science and Stevens’ endless modulations of linguistic structures, which themselves may be said to plot as much as result in fluctuations in temper, which shares common roots with temper-ament and temperature.

Indeed, taking license from Stevens’ comment that “‘Weather is a sense of nature. Poetry is a sense’ ” (qtd. on 91), Halliday speculates that poetry for Stevens is “itself a kind of weather forecasting” that opens “oneself up to the finest discriminations and most accurate perceptions of one’s environment” (91). Halliday’s work suggests many rich possibilities, not the least of which is a profitable connection between the continuous modulation of weather as registered by sound technology (and as frequently figured in Stevens’ verse) with the equally and surprisingly abstract sound of words and their essential turbulence (i.e., modulation). One might connect
the two in many Stevens poems beyond even those mentioned here—for example, “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” in which we see Stevens’ apparent fulfillment of Halliday’s observation that “sound is a kind of weather, being one among many wave-forms such as those of air and water” (94).

By exploring popular modes of poetry readings and the relatively new technology of sound recordings, Tyler Hoffman’s essay, “Wallace Stevens and the Spoken Word,” offers even more evidence that Stevens is less interested in the immediacy or audibility of his work than in the capacity of his work to contain and—in a point that accords with Beverly Maeder’s—to awaken the mind of its “‘invisible audience’” (qtd. on 108). Like other essays in this volume, Hoffman begins by noting a disjunction or failure of expectations—in this case, between what we might expect, given the robust musicality of Stevens’ language, and the actual example of Stevens’ restrained, formal reading style. Hoffman positions Stevens’ reading style in relation to Stevens’ well-noted and extreme distaste for all public readings and poetry recordings, especially his own, as well as to the history of oral recitation styles and the more popular poetry readers in the United States and England. Hoffman shows that the aural qualities of Stevens’ reading “‘constitute a kind of interpretation, a structural interpretation’” (qtd. on 108), one that effectively opposes the vaudevillian or impersonal qualities of his contemporaries, most notably Vachel Lindsay and T. S. Eliot, and that uses the resources of the voice to render the syntactically and ideationally dense statements of the poems as legible.

Hoffman’s careful contextualizing of Stevens’ reading in relation to oral recitation styles and implicit rhetorical modes discovers another important line of approach regarding “the less legible meanings of sounds” in terms of Stevens’ performances and so another ground of argument why the expectations of his contemporary audiences, as Rieke also notes, would be frustrated. Hoffman’s work on sound recordings also suggests another avenue for future scholarship on sound in Stevens. His observation that Stevens in recordings pays attention to pauses not realized by punctuation and seems to privilege syntactic structures redirects attention from Stevens’ explosive play with the sounds of words, which has occupied much critical attention, to the spacing between words, i.e., toward larger syntactic and semantic units. This point fits nicely with Maeder’s arguments regarding Stevens’ preferred strategies of sound in his later versus earlier poems; it also suggests a delightful bridge to contemporaneous free-verse poets such as William Carlos Williams, who consciously declared “the spaces between the words” to take “an equal part in the measure” (149).

In her application to Stevens of Paul Valéry’s notions of the poet as communicating “a sense of a musicalized world to his readers” (115), Lisa Goldfarb, in her essay “Musical Transformations: Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry,” offers a complex response to the familiar proposition that posits the lower limit of poetry as speech and the upper limit as music
Loyal readers of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* will recognize this essay’s kinship with Goldfarb’s equally perceptive essay from the Spring 2004 issue, “‘The Figure Concealed’: Valéryan Echoes in Stevens’ Ideas of Music,” in which she first demonstrates, through extensive references to Stevens’ letters and other evidence, that Valéry’s ideas regarding the musicalization of language and poetry are more important to Stevens’ poetic practice than many critics had previously realized.

The cornerstone of the earlier essay—that the musicality of language in poetry, at least for Valéry, hinges upon its difference from the language of ordinary discourse—also informs this essay, which emphasizes Stevens’ realization of this idea through his entire poetic oeuvre. Goldfarb demonstrates a remarkably thoughtful and sophisticated application of Valéryan ideas and seeks both to awaken and complicate our sense of Stevens’ larger musical project, as she writes, “When we probe the relations between sound and music in Stevens, we discover a narrative that underlies his verse, one that both traces and enacts the transformation of language into a distinctive kind of music” (113). Indeed, Goldfarb’s probing makes us more aware both of the fundamental structural differences among the natural, musical, and speech sounds that populate Stevens’ verse and of the distinctive ways he uses each. Even more helpfully, she uses the structure of his *Collected Poems* to suggest an overall musical design that might enrich our sense of Stevens’ appeal to the materiality of a sonic universe, and reminds us of his penchant for “language as the material of poetry not its mere medium or instrument” (909). Her essay, which unifies insights from comparative literature, music, and conventional literary criticism, returns us to an earlier mode of criticism sadly neglected and, as Filreis notes, in need of new attention.

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Notes

1Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 662. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

Works Cited


If Wallace Stevens contended, “There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning”; if he argued that poetry “makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration”; and if he insisted that “above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds” (662–63)—then why has not the critical response to Stevens put sound at the center of the discussion? Although one can think of perhaps a dozen reasons, here are six: (1) fear of mannerist reputation; (2) guilt by association with the non-innovative; (3) Hi Simons; (4) Stevens’ dull-seeming poetry readings; (5) a lagging interest among critics in sound technology; (6) a certain deafness in the project of disclosing Stevens’ politics.

Early critics in particular feared that focus on sound might too closely associate their own projects with a dead-end mannerism. At the beginning of a perceptive chapter on “Noble Accents and Inescapable Rhythms” in a book of 1967, Robert Buttel warned us—it is my sense that he was also warning himself—that “Stevens suffers from convolutions of style . . . that will wither in the trials of time; no doubt a number of Stevens’ most mannered efforts will meet this fate” (203). Few critics wanted to risk, by association, sharing that fate. As Willard Spiegelman points out in “Sense and Nonsense: Stevens’ Sounds,” “sonic things wink . . . to make all of Stevens’ readers squirm,” and this was for most of us the first Stevens we encountered—Stevens in “zany post-Victorian” mode, as Spiegelman puts it, less tragic and far less relevant in the late 1960s and 1970s than most of us wanted to seem. Buttel’s chapter, which seems at first to be about the sound of Stevens’ poetry, is finally about other topics, primarily the modernist’s relationship to the tradition, or the idea of the tradition, of English prosody. Buttel begins, however, by quoting at length from Stevens’ response to T. S. Eliot’s most cadenced free verse, an aesthetic, when sounded, that led Stevens to ponder the question of what the term “music” must mean to the modernist: “ ‘[Y]esterday . . . music meant . . . metrical poetry.’ ” But now there was a change in the very “‘nature of what we mean by music’” (qtd. on 204).

The enlistment of Eliot was what enabled Stevens’ articulation of his version of Louis Zukofsky’s notion that at the upper limit of poetry is
music (A 138), at the lower limit speech, whereas both latter poets aspired
to the upper limit but refused to write songs (while, it can be added, El-
lot moved progressively down toward speech). I do not claim that But-
tel consciously or even unconsciously suppressed this Zukofskian side of
Stevens, which has in turn shaped at least two generations of poets whose
concept of the sound of words is central to their use of the modernist leg-
acy. But I do suggest that Buttel, one of the sanest of early Stevens critics,
seeking “inescapable rhythms” and tracking Stevens’ idea that there had
been a “change in the nature of what we mean by music” in poetry, might
have felt he would soon reach a critical dead end.

Provocative interventions have been made here and there, such as Mar-
ie Borroff’s analysis of the acoustic and articulatory sound symbolism
in “The Plot Against the Giant,” a focus fundamental to the later devel-
opment of Eleanor Cook’s intrepid work on word-play (she found and
described all those “ithy oonts”). Notwithstanding these eccentric cri-
tical moments, the line of continuity seemed to most critics, including But-
tel, to be moving off elsewhere, especially as the Stevensian quality of
objectivist poetics had not yet been much recognized. The fate of doing
something critically unrecognizable here is, to me, exactly parallel to the
dreaded fate of language-only aestheticism that from the 1920s through
the early 1960s—in Yvor Winters’ line about nonsense, Robert Frost’s
wisecrack about bric-a-brac, Randall Jarrell’s complaint about aural junk-
collecting—was deemed an unfortunate and unredeeming approach to
the poetics. It would not do to have the emphasis on sound set Stevens’
readers squirming, for implicitly the first major project was to make the
poems accessible, further from rather than closer to nonsense. The Ste-
vens relevant to contemporary poets (and here I am going to take extreme
examples from among writers never thought of as deriving from the Ste-
vensian aesthetic) such as Kenneth Goldsmith or Tan Lin, both of whom
often operate in ambient language—words arranged as to be analogous to
sound already in the environment—is the Stevens who strives at times to
“undo the traditional work of polyphonic harmony” and makes “moves
toward a monotony, a dead unison.” This is the little-appreciated Stevens
who responds with beautiful uncreativity to Wittgenstein’s assertion that
“A tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself”—the Stevens whose
words are sometimes a “semiotically dirty, mumbled smattering over the
possibility” of a vowel, such as O.

The phrases quoted in the previous two sentences were not from Gold-
smith or Lin, but from an essay by, of all poets, John Hollander (250–51).
One of the keenest early pieces on sound in Stevens was indeed authored
by Hollander, a writer of sonorous, formally lyric lines, very nearly an an-
ti-modernist (although Joyce was his earliest influence), generally associ-
ated with traditional poetics—a poet not at all in the Pound–Williams–ob-
jectivist nexus. (Hollander is often said by mainstream critics to be writing
in the Stevensian tradition, but in the supposed Auden side of that mode.)
Many young scholars of modern and contemporary poetry were trying to resist the “Whose era is it? Stevens or Pound” dichotomy even before Marjorie Perloff stated the case for this key literary-historical binarism thus in 1982. Taking up Hollander’s cause seemed to cede the language ground to Pound and made sound-in-Stevens criticism unfashionable at best, irrelevant at worst. In 1981, as my handwritten notes on a photocopy of “The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound” indicate, before even reading it closely I filed away the Hollander piece and conducted my own research and writing on Stevens (for a book that made a political reading of a politically unconscious modernist) without the benefit of its insights. There it was nonetheless, a critically incorrect, yet large and fundamental—and super-obvious—claim: “The whole of ‘The Whole of Harmonium’ [Stevens’ term for his overall poetic project, the continuous poetic] is a musical trope” (235). I wrote a thirteen-page interpretation of “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz” and “Mozart, 1935,” describing a counter-politics against the lyric made in verse using music as a trope, without consulting this essay (Modernism from Right to Left 206–19). That a critic such as Hollander works as a poet at the Frostean end of the spectrum of Stevensian phrasing (and sense of nature) kept me from hearing the fitness of the critic’s sense that sounds apparently external to the poet, such as the be-thouing romantic bird, were “asserting their own exemplariness” through words as auralities. Missing the musical forest for the literary-political trees, lured down a single path formed by straight and narrow rather than crisscrossed aesthetic taxonomies, hearing talk of sound but seeing metrical traditionalism, I overlooked the clear assertion that “Frost and Stevens would make very different things of th[e] observation” offered by George Santayana that “‘To hear is almost to understand’” (Hollander 247; italics added).

Hi Simons, the first to ask Stevens in any sort of systematic way about the sound of words, was an amateur critic. He was unconfident and awed, critically a plodding workaholic, star-struck around Stevens’ replies to his letters, and aware of his own tendency to believe utterly whatever Stevens said. As he told a close friend of Stevens’, who in turn told Stevens: “I work so slowly that I am constantly embarrassed about it. . . . I often doubt that I possess that ability to carry water on both shoulders which Mr. Stevens cultivated so successfully . . . twenty-five years ago” (letter to Arthur Powell). Simons was an independent critic whose daily life was consumed by his work as a publisher of medical textbooks in Chicago. He seems to have deliberately misled Stevens by continuing to imply for several years that he was preparing a bibliography even well beyond the point of posing merely bibliographical questions. Their earliest exchanges, beginning in 1938, were all about tracking Stevens’ old appearances in periodicals, but soon letters arrived from Chicago requesting line-by-line close readings. A number of them asked directly or indirectly about the meaning of the sounds words make—for Simons ever the most difficult aspect of the verse to apprehend. Stevens’ replies show that he was aware of Simons’
awe, and his letters—saying for instance that the meaning of “The Comedian as the Letter C” was in the sound of the letter C—were sometimes toneless yet overstated, sometimes oddly ironic, and occasionally just shy of toying with the rookie close reader. Alternatively, they were literalistic in the extreme. Once Stevens began to hear (first from others, then, confessionally, from Simons himself) that his self-effacing correspondent was hoping to write a huge critical biography—“an affair . . . larger than Horton’s work on Crane, something like Foster Damon’s on Amy Lowell” (letter from Harry Duncan), a prospect horrifying to Stevens, who hated the idea of biographical readings—the poet’s answers to the critic’s request for detailed response seemed ironically to bear out, rather than to contradict, his principle against authorial explanations as he described this tenet to Simons directly: “I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed” (L 346). Or, more bluntly when the critic’s questions were about a poem whose form turns on the limits of words as sounds, “A paraphrase like this is a sort of murder” (L 360).

Here the homicide victim was “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The question Simons posed about unreality in canto XVIII of this thirty-three-canto poem might well have led Stevens to discuss how the sound made by the “sea of ex” negates the negation of intelligible language in the poem. The canto is a dream of the sort that defies the term “dream” (“to call it a dream” is the best we can do). The rest is repetition, words crossing the senses (the guitarist’s “long strumming on certain nights / Gives the touch of the senses, not of the hand”) such that the thing, the idea of the thing in the phrase “things as they are,” is lost in the ringing of repeated, modulated phrasing: “A dream no longer a dream, a thing, / Of things as they are, as the blue guitar” (143; italics added).

Thus “ex” marks a poetic spot beyond sounded sense-making, a place toward which the poem’s language drifts. Yet, especially if we have read Simons’ letter (unpublished, housed at the Huntington Library), we can see in Stevens’ reply that he knew he needed first to help his correspondent make basic sense of the exclusive visual scene, so that the “sense of unreality often in the presence of morning light on cliffs when they rise from the sea” (letter to Hi Simons) engages image by analogy as a didactic tool. Impressionism here is an analogy to irreality, not a theme of the poem, nor its aesthetic ideology or mode. The canto uses the sound of words to stipulate unreality too. Yet the brief explanation, published in Letters without, of course, the incoming letter from Simons, or the context of the imbalanced power relationship, seems definitive. There are at least a dozen similar readings. The same confusion, for instance, seems to derive from Stevens’ answers to Simons’ queries about the Arabian in the room in canto III of the “It Must Be Abstract” section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” In the margin of Simons’ incoming letter, next to the question as posed, Stevens wrote this in pencil: “The Arabian in the room & the unscribbled
fores (the vagueness—undecipherable)—is the moonlight” (letter to Simons). He was hardly avoiding the centrality of the “chant.” He was by no means now deaf to the “damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how” (331). He was literally responding to what he thought Simons needed to get along section by section in this epic.

The Stevens community seems to have been thrown off the scent of sound by this exchange for at least two decades, even before Holly Stevens’ edition of letters was published in 1966, because stories of the poet’s detailed explications for Simons and partial quotations circulated among inner-circle critics, promulgated by Holly Stevens and Samuel French Morse, among others (Filreis interview with Morse). Sound got off to a bad critical start, beginning with the way in which the aural excesses of “The Comedian as the Letter C” were read and taught based on a contextless understanding of Stevens’ relationship with the man who first received the seemingly definitive answer to questions about the momentousness of the sound of the letter C.

Notwithstanding the importance of aural abecedarianism, Stevens, in public readings, “threw away all the great lines,” so that his audiences felt “it was almost painful at times” to hear him (Brazeau 167). Without a microphone, even in a small room, “his voice barely carried beyond the third or fourth row.” At Yale in 1948, a woman raised her hand and asked if the poet could “speak more loudly? I can’t hear a thing.” Stevens answered: “I’ll try, lady. I’ll try” (Brazeau 172). That Stevens was such an incapable and apparently indifferent reader of his own poetry at public readings has obviously not helped the cause of sound. Interviews Peter Brazeau conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s with people who attended these readings suggest that the poet’s inability created a general impression that he did not value the heard poem. Yet more eagerly than one might expect, given these disastrous readings and his temperamental shyness, he assented to radio performances and, crucially, to recording his poems at Harvard’s “Poetry Room” in Lamont Library, where his friend James Johnson Sweeney presided over a growing archive of reel-to-reel tape recordings, now the important George Edward Woodberry Poetry Room Collection.

Bernard Heringman, who heard Stevens in public twice—once at Princeton in 1941 and a second time at MoMA in 1951—noticed that Stevens on such occasions “assumed a very sophisticated audience” (Brazeau 199), and perhaps that was his chief mistake. Some of the Lamont session was reproduced on a Caedmon vinyl LP (later sold on cassette), and this is the sound of Stevens’ voice most of us know: metrically emphatic, slow, belaboring pauses, and monotonous. Yet one could argue that Stevens’ problem as a reader was that he paid too little attention, rather than too much, to verse as it is expected to sound like verse. Indeed, now that discussions of poetry and poetics do not start from an assumption that a poetic voice is per se distinct from other kinds of writing read aloud, it seems time to return to these (and other, less well known and perhaps unknown) record-
ings. Heringman remembered, when Stevens at MoMA “switched from prose to poetry,” that “it was hard for a moment to tell the difference” (Brazeau 199); turning this to the advantage of aural poetics might be a good starting point rather than an impediment.

In the preface to Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word, Charles Bernstein describes the book—a collection of essays on the poetics of sound and performed poetry, the audiotext in general—as “a call for a non-Euclidean . . . prosody for the many poems for which traditional prosody does not apply” (4). He is thinking here not just of poets for whom audio recordings survive but of those, modern and contemporary, whose aesthetic will be understood differently through the new emphasis on digital poetics and sound poetry. The more seriously we take Borroff’s idea of the relevance of acoustic and articulatory sound symbolism to Stevens’ prosody, the more we return to our files to find unread essays such as Hollander’s, the more capable we are (through archival and biographical research) to read past misperceptions caused by the poet’s misleading explications of the sound of words, the less likely critics are to worry about the mannerist dead end and the greater the chance that Stevens’ poetics will be part of the discussion of the non-Euclidean prosody augured by the new ubiquitous availability, through PennSound and other projects, of recordings of the poets’ vocalized—as distinct from read—sounds. For the moment, though, Stevens has been left out.

In a large sense, it is true that our theoretical—and also practical—interest in technologies of recorded sound has been slower to develop than that of the modernist poets themselves, who after all worked with “words at the borders of sense . . . in a new world of music[] and voices,” as Peter Middleton phrases it in this issue (78). Yet more specifically it is also the case that the essays in Bernstein’s Close Listening mention Vachel Lindsay, Robert Creeley, H. D., Hugh MacDiarmid, W. B. Yeats, Kenneth Rexroth, Langston Hughes, John Ashbery, Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Laura Riding, Robert Graves, and Pound, Eliot, and Zukofsky, but in all 390 pages of the book there is not a single even passingly substantive reference to Wallace Stevens. Nor is Stevens at all a part of the discussion in New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories, a book edited by Adelaife Morris and Thomas Swiss, and yet most of the contributors are people steeped in modern poetry, and, although the focus is often on recent poetry created for one digital medium or another, the referential and literary-historical base is modernism, such that discussions of Ashbery, Apollinaire, Borges, Brecht, Bob Brown, Coleridge, Creeley, Freud, Joyce, Olson, George Oppen, Picasso, Pound, Stein, Carl Van Vechten, Whitman, and Williams befit the augured new poetics and make apparently good critical sense; but Stevens does not.

Perhaps Stevens’ absence may easily be explained as one of those iterative academic phenomena of cross-citation (critics referring to each other’s
references) that Diana Crane has described for the social sciences: a critic deemed even just momentarily valuable is cited by others trying to draw from an aura, naming the names named by the prized critic, after which mutual referencing proliferates. The new intellectual and aesthetic passion for the sounded and performed poetic word is more significant than that, but to the extent that it does function like Crane’s “invisible college,” it is damage fairly easily repaired. If Stevens is at present not cool enough to be counted among the modernist aural “lingualisualists”—to borrow a term Edwin Torres uses to identify the poet whose poem puts “the eye that is the ear in the back of the brain” (19)—then one practical solution might be for Stevens critics to begin dropping him into the indexes of such volumes. But cynical tactics are hardly necessary. A case for explaining Stevens’ disappearance from discussions of the sound of the modern word can be made, as I am outlining it here, but the thwarting of a positive argument is nonetheless a complicated matter and seems to me associated with the failure of the social reading given Stevens in the late 1980s and 1990s, a trend of which I was a part.

Finally, then, I can only begin to suggest a flaw in that trend. I introduced the problem above, as my sixth reason why sound in Stevens has fallen behind, thus: “a certain deafness in the project of disclosing Stevens’ politics.” Those of us who have tried to make manifest the political life of an apparently unpolitical poet found the requirements of the project were so daunting—and involved, as critical writing, so much primary exposition—that we had to make short work of sound in readings of poems where the music of words is obviously central, such as “Mozart, 1935” and “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” Not that readings of sound-sense would have negated the political re-interpretation—on the contrary—but I at least sidestepped the element these poems add: for one thing, the social resistance, in its own right, that nonsense (“Its shoo-shoo-shoo” [107]) represents; for another, the significance of the climactic moment of a dialogic political narrative—in the apparently forgettable meager canto XX of “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” It is an eight-line poem of fifty-four words. Of these fifty-four, just ten are not repeated in verse that gives the effect of minimalist music, what Helen Vendler rightly calls “[t]he monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar” (124).

What is there in life . . .
Good air, good friend, what is there in life?

Is it ideas that I believe?
Good air, my only friend, believe,

Believe would be . . .

. . . believe would be a friend,
Friendlier than my only friend,
Good air. (144)

And it ends thus: “Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . . .” (144), just at a moment when the poem might have ceased into aural despondency (instead of going on for thirteen more cantos). It is a crucial modulation in the sound of the verse, but also in the political life of the whole poem, where, with the word “guitar” (itself a strummed downbeat), we return to the titular thematic term referring to the idea of improvisation, yet here, rendered as a purely struck iamb, it is itself the improvisation. At such a moment if the ear does not deal with the sound of the poem as and at an impasse, it will be deaf to Stevens’ enacted commentary on contemporary poetics. The end of canto XX is an almost total collapse of social sense-making, a lyric whose political argument—Does the social realist “left” or the aesthetic high modernist “right” lay better claim to the legacy of the revolution of the word?—is reduced to the mere sound of the argued words. The ideological left-right, them-vs.-guitarist, back-and-forth technique is carried so far as to come “near the utmost edge of intelligibility” (Vendler 124). And that is precisely where sound picks up the story that content left off.

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Notes

1Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 307. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

2Hollander’s Picture Window was said to “combine[] a reader-friendly alertness with intellectual sophistication” reminiscent of Stevens and W. H. Auden both, because in essence “his poems try ‘to make words be themselves’ ” (Publisher’s Weekly). Another review of the same book saw Stevens and Coleridge in Hollander’s “cleverly constructed and philosophically agile poem[s]” (Seaman).

3Twice Stevens’ name is given in a list, once by Jed Rasula (there Stevens is on the wrong side of a divide between aurally canonical poets and those whose voices need to be recovered [235]) and again in Peter Middleton’s history of the poetry reading (Stevens is mentioned as one of “among nearly a hundred other” poets published in a 1921 anthology [284]). Rasula does, in a sentence (251), quote Stevens’ “Man Carrying Thing” in order to put into his argument the oft-quoted point, “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully” (306).

Works Cited


WALLACE STEVENS CHOSE to open his first published volume, *Harmonium* (1923), with a poem about bucks in Oklahoma. The geographical setting seems singularly unpropitious for an urban American poet to be writing about in 1918. During the teens, Stevens’ contemporaries were turning instead to self-conscious decompositions of modern life in the city. William Carlos Williams, for example, would seek out the aesthetic experience of the “back streets / admiring the houses / of the very poor” (64), while giving this and several other early poems from his various *Poems* and *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) the provocative title “Pastoral.” At the same time, T. S. Eliot would create a cast of characters in desolate city settings for his *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and *Poems* 1920. Whatever their subject matter, however, the early poems published by the poets we now call “modernist” share a common impulse to experiment with voice, tone, and verse form.

Stevens’ “Earthy Anecdote” provides a noisy and rather slight introduction to *Harmonium* and little foretells of the extensive range of tone and voice the volume will unfurl in poems witty and sublime, ribald and serene, earthy and celestial. It announces only by its incorporation of brave innovations within it that other stylistic horizons may lie within the very same volume. The poem tells rather—as far as it *tells* anything—of experimenting with the way sonic impulses can give life to a single poem. The way it integrates motion into sound invites us to listen to other poems in *Harmonium* and be attentive to the way they deploy sound patterns of vowels and consonants, which I will usually refer to generically as assonance and consonance, but which include internal assonance and consonance, anaphora, alliteration, and rhyme.

The particular “timbre” created by the vowel and consonant sounds in “Earthy Anecdote” recurs persistently in *Harmonium*, yet is rare in Stevens’ later work. As numerous critics have mentioned, Stevens would leave behind some of his early and possibly less “grandiose” experiments in bringing “language and sensation into marvelously close contact” that are prevalent in *Harmonium* (Altieri 172) and would develop a more se-
date texture that emphasizes other facets of his poetics. Happily, readers and scholars of Stevens over the last fifteen years have begun to pay more attention to the contributions of sound in creating sensation and even to the production of sound as sensation in different segments of Stevens’ work; others have, as it were, rehabilitated Harmonium as a serious laboratory for Stevens’ radical, contestatory poetics. Perhaps the “linguistic turn” taken by poets a century ago has now spawned a belated awareness among readers that sounds in poetry—sounds, not just sound—cannot be called “music” except insofar as we submit that term to minute dissection. Yet the temptation to speak of linguistic sound as music is ever-present, as shown by my use of the word timbre above. What is important is to avoid making spurious analogies but to remember in the back of our minds that there are actual qualities that music and language share—that when performed, they both create sound waves of particular pitches and timbres, and that they both move in time (contrary to the plastic arts).

Harmonium is a testing ground for the poetic strategies Stevens would practice and refine during the rest of his career, and many of those strategies involve the qualities of aurality and temporal movement. Some of them incarnate a poetics that might have been, a poetics Stevens did not develop. It is that poetics centering on the linguistic and sensation-creating functions of certain sound patterns that I would like to attend to here. The ambition of this essay is to identify some of the energizing effects—and attendant limitations—of Stevens’ inaugural attempts to renew the sounds of poetry in the early twentieth century. To do so, it will eke out and amplify those sound patterns, understand their effect in the voicing of poems, then weigh their place in Stevens’ poetics and speculate briefly on their sublimation by other linguistic strategies in the later work. My strategy will lean toward the inductive, drawing parts of poems together as we go along, especially as we lack the vocabulary and categories, still, to articulate our experience of Stevens’ experimental poetics. We must hear them in the flesh.

II

“Earthy Anecdote” is partially a visual tableau. It describes how the bucks create arcs “To the right,” “To the left,” and “To the right, to the left,” each time tracing “a swift, circular line.” The action is first announced as iterative, a typical, repeated “Every time the bucks went clattering” and “Wherever they went.” The moment of implied observation ends with the final action of the firecat, who “Later . . . closed his bright eyes / And slept” in the final couplet, so that repeated, habitual movement is brought to an end in the repose that necessarily closes any single event.

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.
Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept. (3)

It is banal to note that the tableau is not static, but moving. The bucks’ “clattering” (three times in different forms) and their “swerv[ing]” (twice), and the firecat’s “leaping” (once) denote movement across the space evoked. In this way, the arcs described constitute a metaphor for any poem in its black and white form—with its lines of signs that must be seen but also actively read. We might understand the animals’ movement as an allegory for the movement of the eyes that follow the words and lines, as they leap from left to right in each line, and from stanza to stanza, and terminate the effort by resting or closing, like the “bright eyes” of the last couplet, at the end of the poem. In a sense, readers actually enact the visual patterns described (or referred to) in the poem: they not only metaphorically set the poem into motion but also literally give spatial and temporal movement to what they see on the page.

Beyond this anecdotal self-referentiality, the sonic qualities of the poem as performance draw our attention to the twinning of kinesis with aurality. The speaker of the poem is not only an observer but also a listener in a world of movement. He transmits what he has heard—“clattering” in “Earthy Anecdote,” like the “skreaking and skrittering residuum” (129) of “Autumn Refrain”—and produces a work that is aural as well as visible, reminding us that poets have always been creators of song. Just as composers traditionally devise new arrangements of notes from pre-existent melodic scales, poets create new sequences of sound from human languages. These sounds move through time, not space. The alliterations and other assonance in “Over Oklahoma” and “swerved / In a swift, circular line”⁴ create forward-moving impulses locally, just as the repetitions of words at the beginnings and ends of lines advance the movement from stanza to stanza. “[C]lattering” not only represents movement and its associated noise in the denotation of the signified, but also of course onomatopoetically sounds it out in the signifier. On the referential level, then, this inaugural poem not only treats Stevens’ readers to a little allegory of reading that stresses the link between the thematics of repeated motion and sound; on the discourse level, it also semantically accompanies the controlled movement of articulated sound; and on yet another level, the sonic patterns of “Earthy Anecdote” provide the reader with a brief experience of auditory movement. We can imaginatively hear the voice of the intoning poet.

Poets in many traditions have harkened to the sounds of nature (as Stevens does almost parodically in “Earthy Anecdote”) as sources for their own intoning and as analogues to the poet’s voice. In the tradition of poetry in English, be it the song of the nightingale or the sound of wind
or waves, natural sounds have counted among what John Hollander has called “tropes of elegance” (236). As metaphors for poetic inspiration, they may figure a poet’s need for an aural nourishment that will allow the poet to create his or her own song. The modernist Stevens attempts to renew inherited tropes of the relationship between natural sound and human speech or poetic inspiration in numerous poems, questioning the relationship between natural and made sound, and problematizing the aspiration toward a transcendence that romanticism had linked with the forces and signs of nature. Stevens has done this, among other ways, through a cast of figures avian, human, and near human. They include the blackbird in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and the addressee of “To the One of Fictive Music” in Harmonium, the girl wandering on the beach in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” and, later yet, the seraphim in “Evening Without Angels.” Poems such as these are congruent with Stevens’ later development in formal and thematic terms. But it is the early playful and shorter poems that instruct us more patently about the specific way the poet’s structures of assonance and consonance contribute to the sensuous awakening that is part of Harmonium’s program; such poems create concise moments of sound that “move” us (in both senses) to listen expectantly.

Among the short lyrics in Harmonium that foreground striking sonic developments, there are several that question the relationship between the perception of natural sounds and the emission of human (or near human) ones. The natural sounds of “Earthy Anecdote,” as we have seen, are represented through onomatopoetic tricks of “clattering,” and are made to contribute, along with sonic repetitions, to the speaker’s synesthetic joining of sound and motion. These effects relate to the wild scene observed, but only implicitly call attention to the act of writing or reading the textual signs or to the desirability of sounding out the poem from beginning to end. A few other short poems in Harmonium, however, explicitly figure the need for a human response by resituating natural sound in scenes that stage human or human-like figures who stand in for the poet, and in such poems, Stevens’ deployment of playful local patterns of vowel and consonant sounds raises expectations that the persona may find an adequate, but fully human, linguistic response. Yet these expectations are typically dashed.

“The Doctor of Geneva” is a good example. It uses an onomatopoetic trick similar to that of “Earthy Anecdote,” but here it produces a synesthesia of specifically human hearing and moving. When the “Lacustrine man” “stamp[s] the sand / That lies impounding the Pacific swell” (19), his impetuous movement seems to mimic that of the ocean, not only in sense (stamp and pound), but also in a twinning of consonantal play (the man’s /s/ and /p/ answering the Pacific’s, his /mp/ echoing its “impounding”). The anecdotal expectation is that the man may transform his sensuous apprehension of the ocean into language. A further synesthesia of movement and sound is indeed inaugurated by the ocean that sets the
man’s “simmering mind / Spinning and hissing with oracular / Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste.” The bubbling connoted and the turning denoted seem mediated by the musical term “Notations,” translated into linguistic notations in the consonances of the /s/ and /r/ sounds and the literal hiss and oracular roar; they accompany the voice reading from one line to the next. But these effects are only temporary. These swirling, sounding mental actions are prematurely cut off by the last tercet’s “Until,” and by the noise/movement of “clanked” and ”sprang”:

Until the steeples of his city clanked and sprang
In an unburgherly apocalypse.
The doctor used his handkerchief and sighed. (19)

Within the anecdote itself, then, the play of sound leads to no human linguistic expression (beyond the impersonal speaker’s). The bells of the burgler’s interiorized Calvinistic culture erase even the new sound from his mind’s “simmering” ear. The final “sighed” marks the personage’s third failure to create verbal form to match a sublime and un-pacific experience of the Pacific. His eloquence cannot match that of a Racine or a Bossuet, the great French masters who serve as his references.

Similarly, the play of linguistic sound around the depiction of conjoined sound and movement occurs in poems that feature muse figures placed in marine landscapes, and, here too, the characters are frustrated from finding an adequate sonic structure. The infanta of “Infanta Marina” can only produce “grandiose gestures” through the “roamings of her fan,” while the sea and the evening “utter[] their subsiding sound” (6) at the poem’s close. The parallel actions of girl and landscape, the gestures and utterance of sea and evening are sounded in alliteration. The poem flows, but the water-girl remains mute (infans, speechless) and even nature’s “sound,” as just quoted, is said to be “subsiding.” The assonance and consonance are “sleights” of sound as ephemeral as the marine infanta’s gestures that become “sleights of sails.”

“The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage” also represents a non-fulfillment. That the muse figure “scuds the glitters, / Noiselessly” (4) is a sign of her charming élan, but one that may be ironically undercut around the unusual plural “glitters,” since it sounds out the speaker’s /z/ consonance against her soundless and speechless traveling. Her yearning for the sea’s “brine and bellowing” also sounds out the object of her desire for us to hear, concentrated by alliteration in a synesthetic onomatopoeia. This in its turn is undercut by the speaker’s foretelling of an “intenser calm” in the last stanza. The paltry, but refreshingly eager and experimental, nude and the poet must both wait for the “goldener nude” who will go in that “intenser calm” (4–5) to renew poetry. These two muse poems seduce us through the vaguely nostalgic imagery of their mythological seascapes and the depth of their associations with painting and literature.
alike. Their overall rhythms and aural structure please us; they seem to produce a freshening of poetic form. On the other hand, the kind of local sonorous activity that may charm (or irk) us in these two muse poems does not promise a sustainable voicing for the long term.

What I would like to emphasize, however, is that *Harmonium* also tries out the audible range of the human voice as an energizing activity that can create its own sound and movement. Indeed, many poems in *Harmonium* pointedly represent moments of human sound making, whether they succeed or fail. They may parody the failure of the voice, or of speech, to come into being, as in “Metaphors of a Magnifico” or “The Doctor of Geneva.” Or they may record the different effects speech can produce when it resonates through various combinations of alliteration, rhyme, meter, and/or line length, as in “The Ordinary Women,” “Ploughing on Sunday,” or “Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges.” Such poems give us to understand, and often to hear, how important the sensuousness of the voice is and how a poem can create awareness of the sensuous presence of the human voice.

The desire to produce sensuous effect motivates each of the girl speakers in “The Plot Against the Giant.” Although the poem’s sound patterns rely relatively little on assonance and consonance of the kind we have been observing here, the scenario nonetheless culminates, with some panache, in asserting the sensuous power of the human voice. In this three-part tale, the First, Second, and Third Girls detail the means they will use to overcome the giant. They laud in succession the seductive power of “the civilest odors” of “geraniums and unsmelled flowers”; the power of the visual (and also kinesthetic) beauty of “cloths besprinkled with colors / As small as fish-eggs”; and, finally, the power of the sounds of “Heavenly labials in a world of gutterals” (5–6). The primacy of the sonic over the visual may be inferred if we consider that the “plot” ends with the winner (as does Marie Borroff, who links the “Third Girl” with the third-comer of fairy tales and reminds us that “‘the third pays for all’” [95]).

On the other hand, whether we infer this or not, the “Third Girl” leaves us to ponder her preference for “labials” (over “gutterals”), which, she says, “will undo” the giant. Although the labials are said to be “Heavenly” and the gutterals would be associated with the grosser “world,” the only example of labials in situ are the *b* and *v* in the phrase “Heavenly labials” itself; so the “Heavenly labials” are tautological. In both the world outside the tale, as well as that within, this metalanguage of classificatory names (“labial” and “gutteral”) draws attention to the very materiality of consonants, their physical place of articulation, and to their effect on the perceiver, more than to the sense of the utterance they are found in. From this point of view, we may imagine that the project of the “Third Girl” is analogous to the poet’s project for affecting the reader, so that in what follows, we can read *He* as “the reader” and *I* as “the poet”: 
He will bend his ear then.
I shall whisper
Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.
It will undo him.

We need not take the parallels so narrowly, however, to hear that in the stanza as a whole, the poet reinforces our auditory awareness via the onomatopoeia of the “whisper” and the earlier “puffing.” The opening consonances of “la . . . le pauvre!” (with its strange hesitation/inclusion of feminine and masculine . . . readers?) get us la-la-ing in preparation for the later “Heavenly labials,” so that we ourselves can give voice not only to the sensations created by imagining the smells and sights of the scene, but also, literally, to the text’s sounded signifiers. As this poem reminds us, voicing the poem requires the bodily expression of the breath filtering, hooting, puffing, murmuring through the throat and lips, doubled by a resounding sensation in the ears.

The centerpiece for an exploration of how Stevens’ play with sound contributes to our awareness of vocal sensuousness cannot but be the cry of Bonnie and Josie as they dance “around a stump” in “Life Is Motion.” Their joyful “‘Ohoyaho, / Ohoo’ . . .” fills the sixth and seventh lines of this little nine-line poem.

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
“Ohoyaho,
Ohoo” . . .
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air. (65)

On the one hand, as Eleanor Cook mentions, this second Oklahoma poem in some ways pulls its readers toward referential “mimesis” (31). It does this in part by anchoring the scene in proper names (Oklahoma, Bonnie, Josie) in the first two lines, mentioning the stump that serves as the center of the dance, and then positing the purpose of the dance, described as “Celebrating the marriage / Of flesh and air.” Bonnie and Josie’s performance, however, is not far from that of their contemporary, the boastful ploughman in “Ploughing on Sunday,” who intones his “Tum-ti-tum, / Ti-tum-tum-tum!” (16) while he ploughs America. Despite their differences, “Life Is Motion” and “Ploughing on Sunday” are alike in putting jubilant preverbal expression into the mouths of yokels while they simultaneously perform some kind of down-home activity. They comprise two of the early Stevens’ lightest, perhaps slightest, and most jubilatory spoofs on received
forms of bardic expression and exaltation.10 In the way Stevens develops these two scenes, it is obvious that any potentially programmatic meaning cannot be separated from the sonic playfulness of the celebrations. Thus, in “Life Is Motion,” the sonic patterns move hand in hand, as it were, with the reference-creating patterns, signifieds, or designata. The sonic path of the long /o/ sound that collects “motion,” “Oklahoma,” “Josie,” “calico,” and the quoted cry “ ‘Ohoyaho, / Ohoo’ . . .” is the celebration, while this poetic fact is nonetheless inextricable from the semantic structure that names and describes it and the syntactic structure that deploys the poem’s two sentences. Sound and sense collaborate self-reflexively both to refer to a celebration and be one.

In such a poem, the celebration of and by sound, whether central or residual, belongs to a complex of energizing activity that is resolutely playful. The activity may have different targets, but certainly the playful, irreverent, and slight poems I am concerned with here share one of the general purposes of Harmonium, which is deliberately to overturn the ponderous or aestheticizing poetic forms inherited from the nineteenth century. The winding of ribbons around the maypole gives way to a rambunctious romp around the stump on the newly cleared frontier. In the process, the sensuous excitement of “Life Is Motion” leaves little room for visual images even as basic and geometric as those that subtend the sonic tableau of “Earthy Anecdote.” This poem beckons to us to simply enjoy the gaudy sonic repetitions we find there. It allows us to hear an enactment, in John L. Austin’s sense, of a particular human voicing as literal celebration, however “unpoetic” “ ‘Ohoyaho, / Ohoo’ . . .” may seem.

The assonances of the cry in “Life Is Motion” make audible and explicit one of the roles of vowel (and by extension, consonant) repetition, which is the celebration of enunciation and the sensuous pleasure that accompanies it. Bodily vibration here is both the expression of the joy of dancing and its amplification in the experience of feeling and hearing. The speaker’s quotation roots the human cry in the earthy, or rather bodily, presence it denotes. But whereas Nanzia Nunzio, in the “It Must Change” section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” says she must strip herself naked to “tremble” with “love” (342), Bonnie and Josie dance their joy “Dressed in calico.” The homespun modesty implied in this phrase elides direct reference to their bodies, yet the body is signified in the “flesh” of the last line. Here “flesh” is revealed as the very origin of the scene, as well as more generally a metaphor for the poem’s visible presence on the page.

At the risk of a reductio ad absurdum, let us say that the anecdote tells of the girls’ bodies performing a “marriage / Of flesh and air” by moving in circles in the ambient air around the stump. This celebration is also performed or enacted in the poem’s words, underscored by the quotation of the girls’ cry. The second action implied in this “marriage,” then, is the boisterous encounter of air and flesh in the throat and mouth, the vibration or resonance it produces there. It is perhaps significant that “ ‘Ohoyaho, /
Ohoo’ . . .” is all air with none of the plosives, fricatives, or other sounds made by flattening the lips or clamping down the teeth. It is all rounded and nearly unobstructed continuous sound. It is a human sound, not the sound of a musical instrument or grackle-qua-nightingale that accompanies this dance. It is the sound of the human body in its entirety expressing not only joy but also kinetic energy.

Bonnie and Josie’s cry is preverbal or semantically empty, like the “inarticulate pang” (55) in “Sunday Morning.” In “The Plot Against the Giant,” the Third Girl’s “heavenly labials” are also at least potentially devoid of sense; it is the “whisper[ing]” of mere consonant sounds that may “undo” (6) the giant. These characters’ energy is expressed in movement and gesture and climaxes in a sounded poetics originating in the mouth, throat, body. They thus play out a rupture with the old idealizing conceptions of the poet’s melodious song making. It is not the characters in the poem, however, who must produce semantically full statements; it is the poet’s voice that does this in sounding out the poem as a whole. This is the poet’s particular task.

What may happen to the poet-speaker when he conjoins a semantically full narrative of sensuous awakening to speech and movement, on the one hand, with a set of highly concentrated sound patterns, on the other? This is nowhere better illustrated than in “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” a poem that both experiments with the possibilities and reveals the limits of these poetic strategies. The narrative division into four succeeding moments underscores the poem’s progress from a moment of conception—“I figured you as nude”—to an apotheosis of the poet-painter’s sensuous experience, when Vincentine sets her creator reeling with the epithet “Heavenly” (42–43). The “Heavenly Vincentine,” who is paradoxically named though said to be “nameless” in stanza I, thus leads him to a quasi-ecstatic moment of revelation.

Vincentine is the poet-painter’s own creation, but she does not come complete. The poet depicts her first as “seem[ing] so small and lean” before watching her transform herself before his eyes. In stanza II she becomes human but (as we are told retrospectively in III) motionless and speechless, “warm as flesh” (but not yet flesh) and “brunette,” then dressed (but not in calico) in “whited green.” The visual brown (“brunette”) and green are added to the “dark blue” of the sky, but more importantly for this discussion, the rhyme pattern that joins “between,” “lean,” “clean,” and “green” with “Vincentine” is concentrated or densified. Whereas in stanza I “between,” “lean,” and “Vincentine” are each separated by a line, in stanza II the rhymes of the last four lines follow in rapid fire with “clean,” “green,” “green,” “Vincentine,” but also include “green” in an internal rhyme-repetition: “Your dress was green, / Was whited green, / Green Vincentine.” The affirmation “Your dress was green” seems to contaminate the end of the stanza with an explosion—or implosion?—of synesthetic color and repeated sound. There is no movement referred to but
only the verbal motion produced by the sonic succession of the word green (three times) and its rhyme words.

This intense rhyme pattern is broken in stanza III, where “walking” (twice) and “talking” (once) also break the rhythm into the hesitating gait of the unstressed final syllables (-ing) of their feminine rhymes. The audible change is crucial for the little Pygmalion-type allegory, for the poet must first see and figure Vincentine endowed with the human attributes of locomotion and speech before he can reach the final apotheosis in stanza IV. She is no longer stationary and no longer infans like the “Infanta.” This respects the natural development of children, but more importantly here it signifies the twinning of some kind of motion and the bodily production of language, Vincentine not just “as warm as flesh” as in stanza II, but human flesh itself. She is being changed from the “lean” “animal” (“lean” is taken from stanza I, to be transformed in stanza IV) to a fellow other with whom empathy is possible. Indeed, the apotheosis at the beginning of stanza IV begins: “And what I knew you felt / Came then.”

The apotheosis of the creator’s experience brings sonic play and kinetic energy to their highest pitch.

And what I knew you felt
Came then.
Monotonous earth I saw become
Illimitable spheres of you,
And that white animal, so lean,
Turned Vincentine,
Turned heavenly Vincentine,
And that white animal, so lean,
Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine. (43)

Although the poet-painter uses the verb to see to describe what happens to him when Vincentine becomes fully humanized, his vision extends beyond its own logical limits into the “Illimitable spheres of you.” As in “Domination of Black,” the speaker is enthralled by the movement of turning (three anaphorae with “Turned”), and although here the word primarily denotes “transformed,” it also shares with “Domination of Black” the sense of a circular movement, initiated by the mention of “spheres” in this case. Although the speaker’s fear in “Domination of Black” is caused partially by the “cry of the peacocks” (7) the speaker says he hears, it is also partially caused by the hypnotic repetition of “Turning” and “Turned” (both as represented and its sonic form). In “The Apostrophe to Vincentine” as well, the speaker’s elation is created just as much by the sound patterns he himself is intoning in the apostrophe as by the vision of Vincentine. To speak metaphorically, the poem’s vowel and consonant sounds turn on themselves, creating a kind of kinesis. The patterns they form reiterate three of the four rhyme words of stanzas I and II in the last five lines.
of the poem, in addition to insistently repeating the three main words ("Turned," "heavenly," "Vincentine"). There is no reference to a particular external sound such as the "cry of the peacocks." Although Vincentine is said to come "talking" in stanza III, only the poet is making the sounds in the poem, and it is significant sound articulated, punningly, incantatorily, to give form to bodily sensation. In speaking his joy to Vincentine, he amplifies the effect of his own creation on himself. The synesthesia of sound and motion occurs even more sensorily in the poet’s voice than in the events the poem refers to, but audibly rather than visually. Readers voicing the poem’s final stanza must, at least in the last four progressively longer lines, modulate or control their breath. They must also carry the performance from “Monotonous earth” to the final "heavenly Vincentine" without stammering over the nearly chiasmic "Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine" (and we recall that "heavenly labials" such as /v/ may "undo" the giant). The condensed play of assonance and consonance seems to reach its developmental limits here.

III

To draw out one possible allegory from “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” it seems as if the poet can hinge a poem upon the dense sonic repetition and motion of human language (or at least English) and reach some sort of dizzying ecstasy. But a poetics cannot be founded on this practice. The sensuous awakening that the condensed play of sounds not only denotes but also performs in us when we sound it out remains all too brief. We might wonder how the poet can channel such exuberant kinetic energy into a poetic voice that not only sounds out this energy as part of a sense experience, but also creates what Natalie Gerber calls “a sustainable mode for meaning” (178).

This problem seems part of what underlies “Farewell to Florida,” which opens Stevens’ next volume, Ideas of Order, published in 1936. This rite-of-passage poem seems to reject the primacy of sensation by critiquing the sensuous South of the Harmonium years. As it bids farewell to Harmonium, however, it deploys the very sonic procedures of assonance and consonance we have seen in several of Harmonium’s most playful poems about poem making. It thus repudiates yet paradoxically supports the seductiveness that sound and its attendant kinesis exert on the speaker. Lexical networks still produce synesthetic overlappings of sensation, but are proportionately less dense. Motion is linked with the sonorous, but also with the visual. In stanza I, for example, we read: “Key West sank downward” away from the moving ship as “silvers and greens spread over the sea” (97). In stanza II, heat ("hot," "ashen ground," “bleaching sand”) and cold introduce the sense of temperature, but also the motivation for the poem, the speaker’s repudiation of the South. His revulsion is founded on the sensual transformation of the “sound / From my North of cold” as it “whistled in a sepulchral South.” The speaker distances himself from both
sound and motion by insisting on the alienity of “Her days, her oceanic nights, calling / For music, for whisperings from the reefs” (97), abjuring the sensuous temptations Florida still proffers to him.

In these examples, the lexical choices emphasize the semantic structure of the imagery by doubling and redoubling quasi-synonyms, building up connotations and metonymies. As for the sound and motion enacted by the voice of the poet apostrophizing his ship, that is, the timbre and momentum of the words themselves, the most noticeable general effect is the variation of the rhythm deriving from a combination of syntax, punctuation, stress patterns, and assonance and consonance. Whereas in the example above from stanza II, sonorous repetitions (“her,” “for”) underscore the hesitant accretion of juxtaposition, in stanza III, they smooth the flow of coordination and enjambment. Thus, in “To stand here on the deck in the dark and say / Farewell and to know” (97), “stand” is cropped to “and,” “deck” is repeated in “dark,” and vowels spelled with a and e modulate or waver before recombining in “Farewell.” However, it is at the poem’s close in stanza IV that a dense texture of assonances and consonances energizes the poem’s oral enunciation and amplifies its sensuousness, while the imagery produces a hint of sexually oriented eroticism.

In stanza IV, then, the poet projects himself in time and space toward his new/old destination of the North, but the trope of the contamination of the North by the South still grips his imagination. This is articulated by a simile in which he now imagines the men of the North

moving as the water [around the ship] moves,  
This darkened water cloven by sullen swells  
Against your sides, then shoving and slithering,  
The darkness shattered, turbulent with foam. (98)

For Stevens, this is a rare foray into almost explicit sexual metaphor—the female ship heaving, even being assaulted, in her watery environment, the male consciousness “turbulent” (like the orgiastic “ring of men” in “Sunday Morning” VII [55]) but finding release. In terms of reference, the human is troped onto the ship and sea, working both metonymically and metaphorically. As with the wind in stanza II, it is the natural environment, not the human voice, that provides sounds and movement on the basis of which the speaker can reimage and verbally articulate his inner world. The sea provides passage from the once “loved” (97) but now rejected paramour of Florida, to the as yet ill-formed image of the North of “the violent mind” (98) of men.

Yet the speaker confers to the sea an erotic attraction that penetrates the sonic texture of his own voice. The twin motions of sea and voice are trickily performed by the eye rhyme in the sequence spelled ov, whose pronunciation varies, or slithers, from “moves” to “cloven” to “shoving.” The kinetic insistence of the “swells” and “shoving” of the ocean are re-
inforced vocally in the /l/ and /s/ or /ʃ/ (spelled sh) sounds of the “sul-
len swells” and “shoving and slithering” “Against your sides.” I would
not like to interpret consonance or assonance as inherently sensuous in
themselves, or insist too much on their being symbolically potent in this
particular context. Rather, I suggest that readers may be drawn to the sen-
suous experience of pronouncing this challenging succession of sounds
and come to recognize the oral and aural sensuality of its concentration
of assonances and consonances. The poem invites us to see that “This
darkened water” (98; emphasis on deixis) implicates this very text and the
very speaking or performing of it. Furthermore, the poet figure represents
himself as performing with his own voice: not only is he apostrophizing
the “high ship” (as the poet-painter apostrophizes Vincentine), but also
he is addressing her with an invocation, in increasingly explicit terms, to
“carry” him onward to the North. Such features constitute an incitement
to perform the poem out loud, to chant its timbre and movement, to par-
ticipate in a sensuous experience in time.

It should be added that the speaker of “Farewell to Florida,” who seems
still torn, takes an ambivalent stand toward his patent eroticism.13 The sim-
ile of “The men are moving as the water moves” (98) plays with as in its
two senses of simultaneity and simile. The simile, however, is also double:
the as performs both involvement and distancing, similarity and difference.
The final sequence of images of bodily desire and release in “Farewell to
Florida” is also permeated by an ambiguity about the poet’s present state.
The closing sentence of rejection is expressed in the optative mode: “To be
free again, to return to the violent mind. . . .” The release implied when the
“darkness [is] shattered, turbulent with foam” is thus a hypothetical one.
The speaker imagines being propelled forward toward his vague new proj-
ect, which is foreseen as being more in phase with his public, more centered
on mental rather than sensuous delectation; but, although the poet depicts
the snake of stanza I as having already shed his skin, his own renewal is still
in process.

It is not to say that this is what Stevens himself conceives, but to say that
he inaugurates Ideas of Order with a metaphor of renunciation that still con-
tains stylistic traces of the sensuous excitement that peppered Harmonium,
here given over to vocally performing while referentially repudiating the
sonic appearance of bodily sensuality in poetry. At the threshold of Ideas of
Order, the reader is thus prepared for the juxtaposition within the volume
of poems such as “Sailing After Lunch,” “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” and
“Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” which ostensibly speak of the strain be-
tween both mental and sensual renunciation and renewal, and poems such
as the “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in which the speaker basks in the
sensual sound and vision he is sharing with “Ramon” and in the lush sonic
texture of his own intoning.

In his poetry from the 1930s on, as in “The Idea of Order at Key West,”
Stevens would place more emphasis on the longer lines and slower
rhythms he was already using in Harmonium in “Sunday Morning” and “To the One of Fictive Music.” He would disperse the play of assonance and consonance among linguistic devices such as other word repetitions (including those of prepositions and other function or nonlexical words) and the cognitive evasions of the verb to be. These he had already practiced in his early experiments. They would allow the voice to convey the sensuous kinesis of sounds and their motion in a more serene mode. More centrally, perhaps, Stevens invests the attention he pays to the body after Harmonium in sight and in the distancing potentials of seeing as a metaphor of knowing. (We should of course note that epistemological troping is very much present in Harmonium too, and not just in the much quoted “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”) It has become a cliché to say that Stevens’ poetry evolves toward greater emphasis on “the act of the mind” (219). In his 1941 lecture, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens insisted on the power of the poet whose “words are of things that do not exist without the words” (663) and on the quasi-ontological quality of the sounds of words in poetry. In the grave times preceding and during the Second World War, when social and political chaos was threatening Western civilization, Stevens exhorted the poet to resist pressures to write about contemporary events and to aim instead at restoring nobility and beauty to life. After the publication of The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937), he conceived of the poet as the artist who responds to our “deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience” and implicitly help us to “listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them” (662). The corollary to this is that explosions or condensations of kinetic energy gradually become sublimated, at least after Ideas of Order, in the wandering of the tongue as it probes tentativeness of statement and works the myriad incompletions that we find in Stevens’ later lyrics.

IV

To conclude, let us look at one slightly later poem that attests to a resurgence of sensuous kinesis now in the guise of a visual epiphany. “The Latest Freed Man” was written in 1938. By this time (as the poem does not tell us), Stevens is almost sixty. The poem displays the poetics Stevens would continue to develop during his later years. The lines are written in more-or-less blank verse, within which enjambments distend the sentences, slow the pace, dilate the duration. Much of the play of assonance and consonance is supported by this syntactic unfurling, which is further foregrounded by the sequence of shorter anaphoric sentences beginning “It was how” and “It was” (187). As Bart Eeckhout aptly writes, the question in the poem is “how the act of seeing should meet unspoken desires even as the sensuous ‘how’ displaces the epistemological ‘what’ ” (167).

As often noticed, the poem begins with Stevens’ alter ego sloughing off sleep. It is six o’clock. Stevens is in a sense playing multiple roles here as
poet, fictive speaker, and imagined protagonist. In the scene-setting intro-
duction (ll. 1–3), the “freed man” is described as sitting on the edge of his
bed, “Tired of the old descriptions of the world” (187). The speaker then
briefly lets the man speak to himself about how he might replace worn-
out theological-philosophical “‘doctrine’” (ll. 3–13). Then, the speaker be-
comes a mediator, returning to the past tense of narration and adopting the
ambiguous role of what we would call the narrator of free indirect speech
if this were a piece of fiction. Among the “‘doctor[s]’” (such as Aquinas)
of “‘doctrine’” in the man’s own discourse, a singular “doctor” is made to
return in this final part (ll. 14–34) as an image of what the man no longer
is. For now he is undergoing a transformation: he is changing “into an ox.”
The ox is associated with the sun, a metaphor in Stevens’ own exploratory
mythology of a life force. Here it also becomes the semantic sign of the
man’s intense struggle to be “free” of inherited assumptions and have a
direct experience of a sensuous plenitude or “strength.” Whether it may
“come[] directly or from the sun” (187) is left open, but the sun is neces-
sary for literal vision to take place. We are a far cry, as it were, from Bon-
nie and Josie’s preverbal “‘Ohoyaho, / Ohoo’. . .” The “freed man” has
a properly epiphanic experience that changes through the different types
of speech or thought representation and ends with the poem’s speaker
espousing his protagonist’s experience. The elaborate performance of the
moment of sensuous awakening in “The Latest Freed Man” calls for us
literally to hear these shifting voice positions as audible speech.

Within the man’s direct speech (ll. 3–13), his audible speaking appears
to actualize and stimulate his own awakening. What is important for us is
that the quotation simultaneously generates some of the vocabulary and,
even more important, the sounds and sound structures that the speaker
later mediates in lines 14–34. The direct speech begins with two rather
static visual pairs of “color and mist” and “rain and sea”; they pivot on a
reprise in “He bathes in the mist,” before modulating into a “light” that
mystifies even more.

“He [the sun] bathes in the mist
Like a man without a doctrine. The light he gives—
It is how he gives his light. It is how he shines,
Rising upon the doctors in their beds
And on their beds. . . .”

And so the freed man said. (187)

The quintuple concentration of the long /ɑɪ/ assonance is less compact
here than in some of the Harmonium poems, but it is still sonically salient.
Moreover, the combination of this assonance with the /l/ consonance and
the repetition “light” (and later “beds”) is what gives this passage its pri-
mary coherence; for syntactically it comprises three incomplete sentences
beginning with “The light” and impersonal “It.” It is this acoustic pattern
that will contribute to the kinetic energy that is both evoked and sonically produced in the following, and last, part.

The man’s own “‘It is how’” also provides the sonic and syntactic material for evoking the heightened sensuous and existential awareness in the third part, with the speaker adapting the direct speech of the man’s “It is” to the “It was” of narration:

*It was how* he was free. *It was how* his freedom came.
*It was* being without description, being an ox.
*It was* the importance of the trees outdoors,
The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
*It was* everything being more real, himself
At the centre of reality, seeing it.
*It was* everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des jolies banales, the chairs. (187)

The anaphorae and other repetitions that I have italicized in these lines ("Qui fait fi des jolies banales" is, of course, italicized in Stevens’ text) need not be explicated in detail. On the referential level, “It was” semantically reveals the impossibility of predicating, to use Kant’s term, the existence of what is being experienced. It is the result of the proper ineffableness of explaining the “how” of “It was how.” On the level of the sonic structure, the large variety of repetitions in this section creates a particular timbre and momentum when we read it aloud. Internal, sometimes partial, rhyme (“free,” “freedom,” “trees,” “leaves,” “real,” “seeing”) is dispersed so as to not impose itself as a structuring device; but it serves to create a light echoing effect, like the repetition of “oak-leaves.” “It was,” placed in positions of attack (in musical terms), provides unstressed introductions to the stressed syllables in “being,” “importance,” “everything.” There is an impression of expansion. The space-time left between the anaphorae is varied, allowing us to hear that a more thorough understanding of the poetics underlying this poem would require examining the metric and rhythmic patterns that dominate our aural experience of Stevens’ poetry after *Harmonium*. Although the imagery in the pre-climactic lines is partially conceptualizing, partly visual, the sensation that is produced by the patterns of repetition is more sonic and kinetic.

That sonic, kinetic impulse seems to culminate in the insistent /b/ and /bl/ consonances (most of them alliterations) of “It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,” diffused throughout the next line as “The blue of the rug” and the “portrait of Vidal,” and recurring finally, attenuated, in the French “jolies banales.” Here we almost find once again the voice of “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” a voice that gives way to the intoxication of sounds that produce more of the same—except that here
the sounds create a movement of variation on repetition. One of the main effects of these consonances is to propel the poem audibly and temporally to the final “chairs.” The eight lines of free indirect thought (which begin “To be without a description of to be”) and their series of predicateless infinitives (to be, to have, to know) prepare for this. The path of transformational process takes on energy in “To have the ant of the self changed to an ox / With its organic boomings.” The “boomings” resonate deeply within the person who is awakening to a new “be”ing but also to a new, prolonged sensation. The visual world, like the “Illimitable spheres” (43) of Vincentine, is interiorized into a sonorous expansion of the whole body, an “organic” plenitude, anatomically imprecise, carrying erotic overtones, but also including sensuous resounding in the ear. This in turn animates the environment in “It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,” where the denotation of expansion and filling is reinforced again by the present participle form (-ing). But what I would like to insist on is that this apotheosis of sensuous awakening, which draws the exterior world inward and projects the interior world outward in sight and sound, should be enacted by the very voicing of it. For the sound has no outer source; it is the voice listening to itself and impelling itself forward. The moment of awakening is a bodily fulfillment but also, as represented in the narrative form, an auditory production.

The sound patterns interweave with the visible world as well. They pull the man outward to the alliterative “blue” of the rug and to the “portrait of Vidal” in the penultimate line, and it is the sight of these familiar objects that also implicitly leads the man to find ever renewed resources in his inner ear. In his final homing in, as it were, the man remembers a phrase that captures the sonority and tone of something that this very Vidal—seen in his portrait but also “heard” in the poem—could have written16: The phrase is jolie in itself—“Qui fait fit des joliesses banales”—and almost covers with its own alliteration in /f/ the long, dispersed sequence of /b/ and /l/ consonances. From sitting on the bed, through “booming” with the sensuous awakening, to setting his eyes on the final “chairs,” not only is the man’s eye replete with sensation, but also his ear and voice embody the transformation through the play of assonance and consonance.

At the end of “The Latest Freed Man,” the mature Stevens, writing in 1938, has thus borrowed from the youthful expressions of sonic exuberance he had tested in several poems in Harmonium and has played some of his old tricks. The balance within this poem is different, however. The poet has learned how to integrate denotations of sonic and kinetic impulses into a story of exalted vision and epistemological evasions. But more important, he has successfully integrated limited moments of suggestive consonant and vowel effects into an auditory experience of momentous developments. It might be said that the poem anticipates the manifesto for poetry articulated in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” written three years later, and that it indeed “makes us listen to words when we
hear them, loving them and feeling them” and “makes us search the sound of them” (662). He brings into an almost seamless texture, rather than into a series of fragments, the whole human sense of being that would imbue many of the poems of old age, “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” the closing poem of *The Rock* and of *The Collected Poems*, and “Of Mere Being,” the last poem Stevens wrote.

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Notes

1 I have contended in *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language* that all the linguistic strategies Stevens would deploy throughout his oeuvre are experimented with in at least short form in *Harmonium*.

2 This is a place to note that among the readers who focus most intently on the detail of sound *qua* sound in Stevens’ poetry figure a disproportionate number of people who wrestle regularly with two languages. They include scholars who are poets and/or translators in their own right, such as John Hollander, Marie Borroff, and Anca Rosu, and other people who have intense contact with at least two languages. Here I think of Anca Rosu, Lisa Goldfarb, myself, and younger scholars such as Bart Eeckhout and Stefan Holander. There may be more than I have guessed. Bilingualism and biculturalism can only increase one’s sense that language does more than communicate content; its sonorous texture is also part of what makes it seem whatever it is in addition to “meaning.”

3 *Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 3. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

4 Further italicizing of individual letters and whole words from quoted examples will be mine.

5 Hollander discusses Stevens’ dissatisfaction with the traditional figurations of the blending of natural and human sound.

6 Eleanor Cook notices how this poem is one of several that play “on the motions and sounds of flowing language and flowing water, usually rivers” (39). Cook and Helen Vendler are among this poem’s most attentive readers. Cook points out that there may be a pun playing on the English “fans” in the poem and Latin *fans* = capable of speech (40). Vendler demonstrates how the leveling of orders of magnitude between the infanta and the sea is vehicled by the poem’s lexis and syntax (including the function word *of*) (64–65).

7 See Anca Rosu’s elaborate and interesting argument about the incantatory effects of “Ploughing on Sunday” (39–43).

8 I follow a different orientation from that taken by Marie Borroff, who is an especially attentive and astute reader of the symbolism of sound systems in Stevens (and Robert Frost). Attributing thematic codes to particular vowel and consonant sounds, she makes the point that the /l/ sound is not a labial itself, but that the word *labial* is associated in this poem with words containing the sounds /p/, /b/, /f/, and /v/ and thus becomes a sort of “honorary labial” that privileges civilized as opposed to gutteral and undifferentiated sound (96).

9 For a study of “preverbal” sound in Stevens’ poetry see Margaret Dickie.

10 Their profane, folksy characters are yokelised versions of the “ring of men” (55) who chant orgiastic praise of their god in “Sunday Morning.”
11 The seemingly simple sonic and narrative thrust of “The Apostrophe to Vincen-
tine” seems central, *incontournable*, to me as an allegory of Stevens’ own wrestling with
his poetic muse, so that I risk repeating myself here.

12 The eroticism and figuration of desire in “Farewell to Florida” have been dis-
cussed by Harold Bloom (110–11) and Barbara M. Fisher (62–63), both of whom read it,
in different ways, through interpretations of the paramour, although Bloom insists that
Florida is “a synecdoche for desire and not desire itself” (111).

13 Lisa Goldfarb sensitively teases out the ambiguities of sonic patterns and images
of desire in exemplary poems from across the corpus. She finds the “greatest virtuo-
sity” in *Transport to Summer*, where poems “touch[] the reader’s desire with poems that
alternately counterpoise frustration and fulfillment” (151).


15 Natalie Gerber and Stefan Holander are among those who have started on this
work.

16 Anatole Vidal, it will be recalled, was Stevens’ Parisian book and artseller before
the Second World War. He indeed sent Stevens a portrait of himself painted by Jean
Labasque and wrote to Stevens in French. The remaining correspondence does not con-
tain the phrase, “*Qui fait fit des joliesse banales,*” but it “sounds” like something Vidal
could have written (Maeder 38, 215–16 n 50).

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The Sound of the Queen’s Seemings in “Description Without Place”

ALISON RIEKE

If there is any period one would desire to be born in,—
is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old, can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

—Emerson, “The American Scholar,”
An Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society,
at Cambridge, August 31, 1837

IN JANUARY 1945, WALLACE STEVENS responded to a letter by José Rodríguez Feo, who had inquired about aspects of the “major men”:

“who are the major men so consistently present in your last poems? Do you write verses for occasional frivolities: like On a birthday, To a plate of Boston beans, On the occasion of sending her a lovely lingerie—you know, the sort of light verse some poets have cultivated . . . ?” (Coyle and Filreis 38). In his typically roundabout way, Stevens barely commits to an answer about his “major men” that might limit him to a decisive explanation of the subject: “I confess that I don’t want to limit myself as to my objective” (L 485). In closing off his reply, Stevens then comments on his preoccupation with sound: “All the interest that you feel in occasional frivolities I seem to experience in sounds, and many lines exist because I enjoy their clickety-clack in contrast with the more decorous pom-pom that people expect” (L 485). If we take Stevens at his word, then his stated interest in sound as a form of resistance to expectation is, for him, a primary motivation behind poetic speech and composition, placing sonic levels of utterance in the foreground of his poetry. A few months later, after his comment to Rodríguez Feo, Stevens did receive the offer to write an occasional poem, and he produced the highly serious “Description Without Place,” hardly an effort demonstrating tongue-in-cheek “frivolities” as a reason for poets to write poems.
In April 1945, Stevens wrote Henry Church that he had been asked “to read a poem before the Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard next June” (L 494), sharing his preliminary thoughts about a topic: “It seems to me to be an interesting idea: that is to say, the idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself, and in every vital sense we do. This ought to be a good subject for such an occasion . . . and that particular audience ought to be a good audience” (L 494). He undertook this topic as his second or third choice, but nothing in the execution of his plan appears to lack confidence or direction (L 494). The resulting effort evolved into a longer poem than necessary for the occasion, “152 lines in the next thirteen weeks and, at his sometimes exasperatingly slow pace of reading, would be twice or three times as long as his audience expected” (Filreis 152). We have no reason to believe that Stevens was dissatisfied with the completed poem and the material it explored, yet a number of critics disparage “Description Without Place” as a career disappointment. Based upon a perceived verbal awkwardness, lack of poetically tuned words and phrases, and rhetorical failure, the puzzlingly negative responses to the poem invite inquiry into Stevens’ preoccupation with poetic sounds defying expectations. What might be perceived as functional and effective dissonance in another poem is here condemned; these reactions reiterate an attitude that the poem lacks sonic, tonal, and expressive force, and that its treatment of subject matter is too abstract to be compelling.

In Stevens’ comments to Rodríguez Feo about onomatopoetic “clickey-clack” vs. “pom-pom-pom” it is tempting to hear a playful explanation for unusual diction. However, in another context, Stevens had addressed his close attention to the sound of specific words in a letter to Henry Church: “Personally, I like words to sound wrong” (L 340). Stevens made this remark specifically about French translations of “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”; he felt that certain word choices in French lacked force and were too “tame” (“ronds” as opposed to “cercles”): “But what I had in mind was something bizarre” (L 340), he told Church. This remark about forceful diction registers a deeply committed choice about how his poetry would be heard and seen.

What applies for French word choices in translation certainly applies to English, and it goes without saying that Stevens’ pointed use of odd and forceful sonic effects extends from Harmonium to The Rock. I would emphatically underscore that he insists his audiences, those listening and those reading, hear poetic effects at work in ways calling attention to forceful oddity rather than comforting sonority and graceful ease of expression—the loftier strain of “forcible enhancings of transfiguration” (Vendler 218) he found useful in other contexts, such as “Sunday Morning.”1 With a few notable exceptions, Stevens’ critical community has cast the poem as a marginally successful attempt to test a premise, a concept that we must accept that we live within a fictive verbal construct and that all uses of language are finally “description without place,” “in every vital
sense” (L 494). Some critics conclude that the subject is chillingly abstract, and that the poem is poetically unyielding because distancing abstractions underpin its internal development.

For Alan Filreis, “Description Without Place” fails as an occasional poem delivered during the historical time in which it appeared, just after the end of the War in Europe, in June 1945. Filreis concludes that it utterly misses its rhetorical mark by suppressing contemporary events in the abstractions of the poem; he feels that Stevens probably communicated nothing to his intended audience (160), in large part because he chose to make “resisting referentiality itself” (156) the central theme of the poem. Yet at the time, Stevens registered considerable concern, even anxiety, about the war. In May of 1945, only a month before the commencement address, he wrote to Leonard C. van Geyzel, a poet and translator living in Ceylon, “At the moment, the war is shifting from Europe to Asia, and why one should be writing about poetry at all is hard to understand” (L 501). The poem at least tangentially addresses its time and place in specific ways by engaging the significant historical force of Lenin and Nietzsche (cantos III and IV). Stevens commemorates the death of soldiers in a time of war, the poet voicing their agony. From “The breath that gushes upward and is gone,” the poet “speaks for him such seemings as death gives.” As Jacqueline Brogan observes, this poem may well be “Stevens’s finest antiwar poem as well as his greatest expression of the ethical responsibility we have in how we choose to order our words” (83).

Both contemporary and historical subjects emerge from the development of ideas within the poem, but critical debate rests, in part, upon the poem’s effectiveness as a vehicle for communicating this material. The problem of what an audience might have heard when Stevens read “Description Without Place” comes to the foreground in its abstract verbal dislocations and peculiar poetic sounds. For Stevens, poetic utterance set itself apart from other discourses by virtue of its deployment of sounds, his range of apparently inexhaustible effects being notoriously idiosyncratic. The apparently dissonant, and even potentially annoying, experimental uses of sound in “Description Without Place” deserve reconsideration, if only because of the sheer length of the poem, along with its imposing premise and its notable relationship to other major achievements such as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

A cluster of issues arises from Stevens’ verbal recalcitrance in “Description Without Place.” First, critics question his enthusiasm for embracing functional awkwardness in an occasional poem; thus, its quirky sonic effects must be fairly assessed with an appreciation for his predisposition to challenge listeners and readers on multiple levels of logical, semantic, and metaphoric comprehension. Second, its intense exploration of a concept may compromise the rhetorical purpose implied by the situation of occasional poetry, though I would suggest that a number of passages in the poem need close but not “closed” attention to reading (Eeckhout 9) before
drawing this conclusion. Third, aesthetic questions integral to Stevens’ broader achievement are at stake, whether or not the poem rises to a standard of accomplishment set largely by his critics.

Stevens’ iteration of the word “seeming” and “seemings” offers an entry into this reconsideration of his sonic effects and recalcitrant poetic sounds in “Description Without Place.” His concentration upon these words suggests calculation and design, and purposeful sonic effect. Twenty-nine words in the poem sound variations upon “seems,” as the list below illustrates:

“seem” and “seems”: five uses. “Seem” is more widely dispersed throughout Stevens’ poetry (in twenty-four lines), with two uses in “Description Without Place”; the same is true of “seems,” with three instances in “Description Without Place” (twenty-four total in his poetry).

“seeming”: fifteen uses. Stevens uses the word “seeming” a total of twenty-one times in his poetry, once in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” once in “Forces, the Will & the Weather,” once in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” and three times more in Opus Posthumous.

“seemings”: nine uses. No other uses of “seemings” appear anywhere in Stevens’ poetry.

High concentrations of individual words appear in other poems, so this is not a phenomenon unique to “Description Without Place” (for instance, Stevens used the word “blackbird” only one more time in his entire career after “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”; see Serio and Foster). With only five uses of the more expected words “seem” and “seems,” twenty-four total uses of “seeming” and “seemings” would appear excessive, if not clumsy. Whether one is hypnotized, bored, mystified, puzzled, or excited by such repetition, one must ask why Stevens uses words incessantly in a chosen verbal environment, and then does not emphasize them again, or even allow them to enter his broader poetic vocabulary.

In “Description Without Place,” he repeats the word “seeming” four times in the first six lines, with two more uses in lines 11 and 12:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
Or like a seeming of the moon or night

Or sleep. (296)
Lines 1, 4, and 6, 13, and 19 of canto II repeat the word, and that accounts for 11 of the total uses. Stevens’ persistent uses of “seeming” in cantos I and II signal a sonic and semantic oddity, even while they may not initially strike the reader or listener as conspicuously repetitious, as subsequent appearances of “seemings” are placed at a greater distance from each other (except in the poem’s closing lines). Stevens uses the word primarily as a gerund functioning as a nominal; however, as an abstract verb converted to a noun, “seemings” alerts our attention to “seem” in its progressive aspect. The use that preoccupies him in this poem points toward the presence of an abstract object, “a seeming,” but one that resists stasis, the “-ing” ending plus a form of the verb “to be” enacting time as ongoing. The poem actually announces itself as being about time—past, present, and future—and this function of the word “seeming” is heavily invoked in the opening two cantos. It should be noted that time as a focus for a commencement address is entirely appropriate, if not expected.\(^7\)

In his original statement about the subject matter, Stevens implied that his topic was fitting, appropriate for the occasion, “a good subject” for a “good audience.” The opening canto also addresses a familiar subject within Stevens’ canon, his “green queen” as muse of poetic imagination, and some members of his listening audience might be reminded of references to her in earlier poems.\(^8\) Stevens creates an overt link in this poem between his “green queen” and his progressive “seemings,” the assonant rhyme forming a cluster of words, including the infinitive verb “to be” and the past tense “became”: “This green queen / . . . By her own seeming made the summer change/ . . . And seems to be on the saying of her name. / Her time becomes again, as it became, / The crown and week-day coronal of her fame” (296–97). Stevens’ “green queen,” the acknowledged muse of the imagination here, rises daily, the sun providing her “week-day coronal” or crown. As he constructs her here, she stands in for his articulation of the natural passage of time—past, present, and future—and the progressive “seemings” that beset the poem. Language, subjected to constraints of time, slides away as verbal disappearance in “Description Without Place.” Also, Stevens reasonably could have assumed that his educated audience would recognize connections with his prior poetic achievements.

Stevens’ clever, polysemous use of the word “seeming” extends its contemporary range of definitions: historically older meanings of the word include “Suitable, beseeming, fitting,” in other words, “appropriate” (\(OED\)).\(^9\) No doubt, readers and listeners would first hear the primary meaning in Stevens’ repetitive use: a state of “appearance,” not quite “being”: “Apparent to the senses or to the mind, as distinct from what is” (\(OED\)). Yet Stevens’ use of “seeming” early on in “Description Without Place” allows the reader to substitute “fitting” for “appearance.” Note the reference to the sun in line two, “As the sun is something seeming and it is.” The sun appropriately exemplifies the expansive subject of time addressed in the poem. This same polysemy is suggested in Stevens’ reference to his “green
queen”; she is decked out in her fitting attire, her “coronal” appropriate to her manner, carriage, and power in the poem, as she emerges “In the golden vacancy” (297).

Would Stevens’ audience at the commencement address hear this nuance? The secondary meaning of the word “seeming” would probably slip by most listeners, even though the word is clustered toward the beginning of the poem and emphasized through repetition. Yet college graduates who might be familiar with a substantial body of English literature from Chaucer to Shakespeare—then and now standard texts in the liberal arts curriculum of most colleges and universities—could well be aware of the multiple meanings suggested by the word “seeming.” These multiple uses might have been obscure to his listeners, but when read on the page, Stevens’ manipulation of verbal “seemings” clearly addresses the occasion. Moreover, a familiar play such as Hamlet, one of the most revered tragedies taught in liberal arts programs, plays upon these meanings—and features a Queen with problematic, unseemly manners (“Assume a virtue if you have it not” [III.iv.160]; see Schoening 141–42).

Stevens was attuned to customary references to Elizabethan dramatists in such addresses, and he elsewhere acknowledges that an audience might expect to hear them in a Phi Beta Kappa speech. The Elizabethan scholar Theodore Spencer had, in fact, produced a banal poem, “The Alumni,” just two years prior to Stevens’ effort for the Phi Beta Kappa commencement address. In a letter to Henry Church (July 2, 1942), Stevens discussed Theodore Spencer as a potential lecturer on poetry at Princeton, but felt the scholar was not a promising choice for that occasion. Stevens’ reservations are qualified by the remark, “I wonder if he wouldn’t be more or less literary and correct with references to the Elizabethan dramatists, and so on” (L 411). A famous address of this type is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s speech to the Phi Beta Kappa society in Cambridge, now well known as “The American Scholar,” where Emerson makes a pointed reference to Hamlet as the epitome of confusion and indecisive thought in a time of revolutionary historical change:

We, it seems, are critical; we are embarrassed with second thoughts; we cannot enjoy any thing for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes; we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet’s unhappiness,—

“Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”

Is it so bad then? Sight is the last thing to be pitied. Would we be blind? (68)

As Emerson closes his essay with Hamlet’s tragic “pale cast of thought,” Stevens opens “Description Without Place” by heavily relying upon Shake-
speare’s familiar masterpiece; memorable lines from it form at least part of the foundation for Stevens’ word play about seeming and being. By way of awkward fluctuations in his speaker’s development of ideas, particularly in cantos I and II, Stevens loosely disguises the figure and voice of Hamlet. Doing so, he introduces a problem central to the poem: that clear, decisive, and eloquent thought may be compromised or threatened by historical pressures including the violence of war and revolutionary change.

A nuanced reading of the opening two cantos reveals how tangled are Stevens’ multiple uses of the word “seeming,” and how tied up they are in verbal echoes of *Hamlet*. In Mark Schoening’s view, Stevens’ clotted and ultimately illogical development of ideas about “seemings” suggests Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy, and then an argument Hamlet has with Gertrude about falsity and appearances (“Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’ ” [I.2.76]).11 Stevens extends these echoes in canto II where a marked verbal awkwardness supplants the more confident, straightforward evocation of the “green queen” as a controlling muse in canto I, where she asserts her power: “Her green mind made the world around her green” (296).12 Rather, we hear the tonal indecision that can be associated with Hamlet’s famous lack of resolve. As canto II opens, the speaker waffles over an appropriate way to articulate the subject. He diminishes the queen he has just crowned and praised by saying she is merely “this queen or that” (297); the confident phrasing of canto I is replaced with verbal fluctuations in which the “green queen” is a subordinate presence in a string of ideas bound by time and history: “An age is a manner collected from a queen. / An age is green or red. An age believes / Or it denies” (297). On the other hand, echoes of Hamlet’s ponderous questions, central to being and seeming, do persist in canto II:

\[
\text{Hence} \\
\text{Its identity is merely a thing that seems,} \\
\text{In the seeming of an original in the eye,} \\
\text{In the major manner of a queen, the green} \\
\text{The red, the blue, the argent queen. If not,} \\
\text{What subtlety would apparition have?} \\
\text{In flat appearance we should be and be,} \\
\text{Except for delicate clinkings not explained. (297)}
\]

Here Stevens’ field of significance attached to colors in this poem slips into a state of flux, as the queen is now alternately “red,” “blue,” and the antiquated “argent” suggesting heraldry (and possibly the diction of *Hamlet*). Moreover, the use of “argent” might confuse any audience listening to this passage, or any reader for that matter, where a patriotic reference
to the United States flag might be expected. In heraldry, “argent” is alternatively a term used for “white” or “silver,” so Stevens again shifts his diction to an outdated usage, making the list sound awkward.

Stevens’ use of dated or obsolete diction often recalls earlier historical time periods. In “Description Without Place,” he creates a temporally layered representation of two violent periods in history: he develops material after canto II that suggests the contemporary crisis of World War II, just coming to an end amid growing anxieties leading to the Cold War. He also recollects, through verbal echo, the tragic events in the Danish/Elizabethan court of Hamlet. This layering prepares the reader for canto III, which culminates in a depiction of the dead soldier’s blood and the poet’s corresponding “breath that gushes upward and is gone, / And another breath emerging out of death” (298). Stevens’ reference to war is finally abstract, but the prior references to Hamlet might remind the reader and listener of his violent death, while also commemorating any soldier perishing in the war.

Are Stevens’ shifts in historical time, achieved through highly idiosyncratic uses of diction and verbal echo, too complex for any listening audience to comprehend? They may be, but evocations of the familiar territory of Hamlet might resonate with his audience, generally suggesting the poem’s central concern for finding appropriate modes of expression adequately to convey moral confusion, historical upheaval, political turmoil, and even death. Moreover, these echoes of Hamlet, drawn as they are from an enduring literary text, stress the potential for art to have an impact within and outside of historical time. Shakespeare’s endurance may be used to demonstrate how poetry transcends time as a vehicle for commenting on difficult political and social issues.

Stevens builds an implicit contrast between the morally compromised Queen Gertrude of Shakespeare’s play and his own enduring muse. Although the “green queen” may not triumph at the poem’s close, the sonic emphasis placed upon her presence—the assonant rhyme of “green queen” with the poem’s many “seemings” in the foreground of the poem—suggests her potential for endurance: the “green queen” issues from a natural rather than a political or social order, which alone may be a sufficient affirmation of her power. One passage evoking her in canto III—“There might be in the curling-out of spring / A purple-leaping element that forth / Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so” (298)—longs for her presence as a fulfilled, fecund indwelling of “spirit” in a ripe seed.

Stevens continues to develop “Description Without Place” along lines that might resonate with his audience, even while it also seems bound by its insistence upon awkward and convoluted speech. Canto III culminates in its moving but abstract reverie upon a dead soldier, where the poem’s speaker articulates the yet unfulfilled wish for “a change immenser than / A poet’s metaphors . . . / . . . a point in the fire of music where / Dazzle yields to a clarity” (298). The incipience of poetic expression is evident in
the apparently wrong comparative, “immenser” rather than “more immense” (I will comment further on the awkward comparatives and superlatives later in this essay). “Dazzle” literally indicates a state of confusion or blindness; yet interestingly, definitions of the word current since World War I would resonate with his audience as military “dazzle,” the large patches of color used as camouflage on warships. “Dazzle,” typically evoking a visual effect, a brightness or glitter capable of blinding vision, is here hopefully subdued by the aural musical effects of poetry itself, “fire of music,” this powerful utterance overcoming the violence of war-time “dazzle.” Stevens’ line of thought, one must concede, is difficult to follow; however, its fusion of fire with speech is close to that of T. S. Eliot’s in the Four Quartets (collected in 1943), where “the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire” (“Little Gidding” 145).

At the close of canto III, Stevens glances at several historic figures, and most critics agree that Stevens’ Queen Anne, Calvin, and Pablo Neruda in Ceylon represent various ways in which controlling individual perspectives have imposed ideas upon larger segments of society. The fact that Stevens introduces the poet Pablo Neruda here may appear idiosyncratic and arbitrary beside Queen Anne and Calvin. Yet the poem reaches for examples in the political sphere that reinforce his concern about the place of art and poetry amid the flux of history. Neruda served as a consul in Ceylon in 1929 and 1930 (Filreis 330 n 94), and did embrace political subjects in his poetry.14 These brief, apparently disjunctive references might confuse the rhetorical aims of the poem. However, they intellectually challenge any audience or reader to understand Stevens’ inclusion of them, especially as they are followed by two well-developed, linked portrayals of Nietzsche and Lenin. Stevens’ characterization of these various perspectives ultimately casts doubt upon their sustaining influence in the world, situating them in the past where their views join the “description[s] without place” everywhere present in the poem. Words create versions of the world at particular points in history, but humanity must turn its attention forward to “seemings that are to be” (299). He reaffirms this point in canto V: “The future is description without place, / The categorical predicate, the arc” (300), the grammatical reference thrusting the sentence forward in time, along with the poem’s persistently optative mood of “There might be” (298). The development of ideas in the poem eventually invokes an urgent need for apocalyptic change in a confused world, at some unknown time in the future, a state of being in which “Description is revelation” (301).

In canto IV, Stevens ponders more deeply Nietzsche as thinker and Lenin as revolutionary politician, addressing two perspectives that might impact his audience’s political and intellectual history. Lenin’s version of revolution impinges upon that of the poet’s, and Stevens’ development of ideas in canto IV reflects his distaste for the Socialist’s “apocalyptic legions” (300).15 Political and economic anxieties, fueled by Lenin’s cause in the form of the proletariat threatening to take over the social order post
World War II, might profoundly impact individual artistic endeavors, obviously the center of Stevens’ cultural universe. The poem’s odd, clotted diction, inchoate speech, and dense phrasings register a level of anxiety Stevens struggles with just at this point in history. Stevens’ uneasiness is heard deeply in a letter to James Guthrie in June 1945, at exactly the time he delivered the Phi Beta Kappa address. He devotes a paragraph to the Japanese war and another to America as “a vast countryside”: “I don’t think that most of us have realized the extent to which conspiracy and greed and gall dominate the world. . . . There is an impression of profound disturbance and of bewilderment as to the outcome, and of intense doubt as to the purposes of the disturbance” (L 506–07). Hearing and reading the disturbed poetic sounds in “Description Without Place,” one feels Stevens’ urgent need to articulate that anxiety and to recover poetic language as a “redemptive force” (Brogan’s phrase; 83).17

A listener might not follow the manner in which the portraits of Lenin beside a lake disturbing the swans and Nietzsche beside a pool “gildering the swarm-like manias” (299) are crucially linked to issues of sound and poetic speech. Scrutinized closely, however, they convey much about Stevens’ semantic, sonic, and etymological fields of reference in the poem. Although Lenin destroyed oppressors and the privileged—“His mind raised up, down-drowned, the chariots” (300)—his presence most obviously threatens poetic melody, as he is depicted driving away swans. Stevens may have dismissed the poetic use of swans as outworn tropes earlier in his career (for instance, “Academic Discourse at Havana”), but here he acknowledges their historical endurance as tropes for poetic melody. The disturbed “swans” subtly emphasize Lenin’s potential to impinge upon poetic melody when examined through the lens of Stevens’ etymological field of references. “Swan” derives from words meaning “melody” and “sound”:

The name was app. applied orig. to the “musical” swan, having the form of an agent-noun f. Teut. swan--: Idg. swon--: swen-, represented by Skr. svánati (it) sounds, L. . . . melody, song, swinsian to make melody. (OED)

Swans were also figures in heraldry (OED), to which Stevens alludes several times in this poem, again their power as historical symbols underscoring their endurance. We note that Lenin cannot destroy them outright, as they “fled outward to remoter reaches, / As if they knew of distant beaches” (300).

For a number of obvious reasons the swans serve here as Stevens’ metaphoric representation of poetry and the arts—including ballet, as Anca Rosu hears in this section a reference to Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake (156). Ben Jonson’s famous reference to Shakespeare as the “Sweet Swan of Avon” could resonate with his listening audience, as might the echo of W. B. Yeats’s “The Wild Swans at Coole” (1919). There Yeats’s speaker
admires swans drifting upon a pool and questions where they will build new nests, “when I awake some day / To find they have flown away” (130). Lenin, the canto cleverly notes, must keep his eye on the swans, as if he might try to prevent their return: “and swans far off were swans to come. / The eye of Lenin kept the far-off shapes” (300). Poetic melody is threatened in the poem, and the powers of the poet are equally tested, but the passage asserts that Lenin cannot subdue poetic effort forever in the actual world: the swans will return. Stevens’ distaste for Lenin’s politics seems available to the reader, though perhaps this portrait of a diminished Lenin would have remained murky and unclear to the Phi Beta Kappa audience. That the artist might willingly join Lenin’s masses seems inconceivable to Stevens at this point in history; he registers anxiety in a voice that casts around for suitable words to express his thoughts, here through a series of internal rhymes: “And reaches, beaches, tomorrow’s regions became / One thinking of apocalyptic legions” (300).

The figure of “Nietzsche in Basel” (299) has provoked conflicted views among critics, though in general readers contrast him with Lenin, countering the fixed views of the revolutionary with “the project of sustaining the ‘moving and the moving’ of ‘forms’ ” (Schoening 147), as Stevens portrays the thinker’s deep “revery.” Stevens’ Nietzsche is opaque, more ambiguously drawn than his version of Lenin; he is potentially a deep thinker—he “studied the deep pool / Of these discolorations” (299)—but one whose apparent depth may have turned subjectively and not productively inward upon itself, “In perpetual revolution, round and round” (299). “His revery,” attempting to be all encompassing, capturing “The eccentric souvenirs of human shapes, . . . All final, colors subjected in revery / To an innate grandiose” (299), troubles Stevens’ coverage of him. Moreover, in terms of the failure of language through jarring sonic resonances, the passage about Nietzsche deserves further scrutiny, especially regarding Stevens’ odd characterization of the philosopher as “gildering the swarm-like manias” (299).

This obscure meaning of the sonically awkward “gilder” is unavoidable to those who study the poem on the page, though certainly his listening audience would not have caught it, and could well have heard the reference to Nietzsche’s thought and influence as flattering, his thoughts so potent they could “gild” the sun. The highly awkward and obsolete usage of “gildering” sounds wrong in this context, as an audience or reader might expect the more direct “gilding,” as in applying a layer of “gilt” to a surface (which, in another sense, can refer to false “seeming,” as “gilding” may hide an unattractive surface with a layer of gold leaf). However, the twice-repeated “gilder” is an obsolete word that means “To catch in a snare” (OED). Stevens repeats the word to heighten our attention to it, depicting the philosopher as gathering the world into a snare: “The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool, / Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution” (299). Nietzsche’s “revery” wraps the human world,
all its shapes, colors, and even its “eccentric souvenirs . . . crowd on curious crowd” in his generalizations. It also attempts to capture nature itself, and Stevens resists the philosopher’s powerful subjectivity; “The sun of Nietzsche,” a snare for his own muse the “green queen,” might restrain her in maniacal revolving thoughts (299; note also the reference to “a gilded street” along with an invocation of “my green, my fluent mundo” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” 351).

The abstract image of “the swarm-like manias” caught in that snare makes it necessary to supply the obsolete meaning of “gilder.” The passage is etymologically charged in further ways, however, and Stevens heightens attention to the word “swarm” by turning it into a compound adjective, with “like,” to describe a disturbed state of mind, i.e., “manias.” “[S]warm,” the key word in the passage, indicates that “sounds” themselves are threatened, and, in fact, those sounds are directly linked to Stevens’ choice of the word “manias”: “The root is usually identified with that of Skr. svarati sounds, resounds, svará, svára sound, voice, and connected further with sur- in L. susurrus hum, MLG. surren to hum” (OED). Moreover, the root of “swarm,” from words meaning “sound,” is related to agitated, confused, or deflected movement (“swarm” and “swerve”); also related to “the meanings of G. schwärmen to swarm, rove, riot, fall into reverie, rave” (OED).¹⁹

“Swarm” also belongs to Stevens’ etymological and onomatopoetic fields of reference, literally referring to bees or insects, their sounds resonating from the natural order of the “green queen.” Stevens puns elsewhere on “bees” and “to be” or “being,” notably in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—“This warmth [of spring] is for lovers at last accomplishing / Their love, this beginning, not resuming, this / Booming and booming of the new-come bee” (338). In “Description Without Place,” Stevens states in canto VII, “It is the theory of the word for those / For whom the word is the making of the world, / The buzzing world and lisping firmament” (301). “Buzzing” calls attention to the sound of bees (and “to be”) in the poem, but “lisping,” a sound Stevens oddly attributes to the “firmament,” reinforces the poem’s halting, impeded speech sounds. Thus, the portrait of Nietzsche, fraught with verbal ambiguities, seems marginally less threatening than that of Lenin; yet it may suggest that Nietzsche accomplished little more than capture his “revery” in a deceptive snare. Set beside that of Lenin’s banished, melodic “swans,” Nietzsche’s “swarm-like manias” can be convincingly read as paired, not contrasting, images, suggesting that Stevens distrusts both figures.

“Description Without Place” continues to reflect upon time and history, building toward its apocalyptic gesture. In cantos V and VI, Stevens posits, via the “poet” of the Biblical Book of Revelation, a powerful need for speech that might impact reality, though he uses a kind of language that continues to slide away from its object. Stevens also persists in inserting uses of marginally sonorous diction that sound “wrong”; his Phi Beta
Kappa audience might hear Stevens’ numerous awkward comparatives and superlatives as poetically odd. The most glaring instance of this appears at the close of canto VI in the phrase “The thesis of the plentifullest John.” One explanation for Stevens’ recalcitrant insistence upon this superlative instead of the phrase “most plentiful John” might be the poem’s experiment in capturing inchoate or halting utterance, incipient poetic speech not yet confident in itself. Of Lenin, Stevens writes, “The slouch of his body and his look were not / In suavest keeping” (299); of the future, “the brilliantest descriptions of new day, / Before it comes” (301); of description itself, “Intenser than any actual life could be” (301); he speculates upon “a change immenser than / A poet’s metaphors” (298).

In his odd comparatives and superlatives, Stevens certainly echoes Shakespeare, and Early Modern English generally, where freer, more fluid uses of adjectival inflections are persistent. Moreover, H. W. Fowler’s prescriptive reference work, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1926), set the standard for books on correct style and English usage and was well known to anyone interested in the minutia of correct English and deviations from it. Fowler informs us, under the entry for comparatives and superlatives, -er and -est, that some adjectives can be heightened with the use of the superlative -est “without the stylistic taint illustrated” in uses based on “NOVELTY-HUNTING, & developing into disagreeable MANNERISM, [where] the use of -er & -est is extended to many adjectives normally taking more & most” (see his discussion of uses 4 and 5; 146). Fowler describes these appropriate uses:

- The terminations that most invite this treatment are -ful, -ing, -able, -ed, & -id . . . [but] -ive, -ic, & -ous, reject it altogether (curiouser & curiouser is a product of Wonderland). . . . [T]he words are felt to be little less normal, & yet appreciably more forcible, than the forms with most; they are superlatives only, & emphasis is their object. (146)

With these exceptions in mind, Stevens’ “plentifullest John” falls within the range of an appropriate choice where the poet chooses a phrase that sounds out of the ordinary and “more forcible” than the expected use “most plentiful.” The apparently forced comparative, “Intenser than any actual life,” also conforms to Fowler’s exceptions for disyllables allowing the ending -er (disyllables with the accent on the last syllable; see uses in 1; 145). Fowler’s exceptions, not “disagreeably challenging attention” (146), may well sound wrong to those who hear them. However, it appears that Stevens again employs this kind of awkwardness for emphasis, to be forcibly assertive in calling attention to words and phrases (see also his use of “delicatest ear” [219] in “Of Modern Poetry”).

Occasional poems may have conventional limits or conditions that define them, but these are considerably more fluid in poetry than in prose. “Description Without Place” does not patently avoid aspects of the for-
mulaic content of a commencement address, but Stevens appears to have been staunchly uncompromising as to the form that expression would take. Yet, even before he read the poem at Harvard, he clearly planned for its publication: in May, 1945, he offered it to Allen Tate for the *Sewanee Review*, as Tate was already including an essay on Stevens by Hi Simons in a number of the journal (*L* 497; Stevens’ poem and Simons’ essay appeared in the Autumn 1945 issue). In effect, the poem was already conceived for two quite different audiences when Stevens wrote it; his readers were eventually able to study more closely what he read at the commencement. With the stature he enjoyed by 1945, Stevens could hardly be expected in an occasional poem to diverge widely from his plans for publication.

Critics generally concur that the poem’s potential for resolution rests upon the perpetuity of poetry itself. The poem haltingly expresses its hope that a revelatory poetics might at some point in the future transcend the vagaries of time and history. Poetic utterance, the poem asserts, must endure, because it can exist both inside and outside of time, and so be an efficacious description of the human condition not tied to place. Stevens’ muse of nature, his controlling “green queen,” does not mitigate the poet’s awareness that the historical present is troubled, or that moments in the past have not been equally as violent: “An age is green or red” (297), as he stated earlier in the poem. In fact, Stevens chooses not to close the poem with the affirmative “green,” natural order he had invoked at its beginning, but with the color red, which redundantly dominates the poem’s closing lines, while it repeats its “seemings”:

It matters, because everything we say  
Of the past is description without place, a cast

Of the imagination, made in sound;  
And because what we say of the future must portend,

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be  
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening. (302)

These reddened rubies that attain their rich color “by rubies reddening” remind us of Stevens’ emphatic progressives in the poem, along with his inclusion of the historical past as a necessary part of his reverie about “description.” He reiterates “seemings” in the second to the last line, perhaps again to force awkward emphasis upon listening and reading audiences. But the color red might also carry associations with blood and violent disturbance, converted here into an enduring jewel-like poetic abstraction to close the poem. As much as he might like to, in “Description Without Place” Stevens does not substitute a force of natural change for political or social turmoil. Change within nature’s time is concomitant and ongoing, a daily passage of “seemings”; however, poetic melody will endure
as an idealized way of addressing the human condition, including the agony of death, warfare, and social revolution. In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” Stevens writes, “The poem is the cry of its occasion” (404): the outcry, as a disruptive aural unintelligibility in “Description Without Place,” speaks for the bewilderment and confusion of a momentous point in history.

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Notes

1 Helen Vendler comments on “Description Without Place” that the poem’s “rhetorical aim is a queerly hypnotic one[,] . . . a steady guitarlike hum of reiterated syllables, aiming by and large not for the forcible enhancements of transfiguration, but for the intricate pulse and steadiness of self-involved major and minor premises” (218); “[d]octrine has replaced melos, as Stevens acknowledges his own abstraction” (225). Joseph Riddel posits its “dangerous aridity,” “not likely to earn for Stevens many admirers” (198). Anca Rosu finds it “muted by a sleight mannerism and self-pastiche,” potentially disappointing to habitual readers (153).

2 Alan Filreis states, “Given the overwhelmingly obvious concerns of the time, the poem’s choice of abstraction deliberately incites controversy, or at least disappointment, as its point is to frustrate the usual effort to hear topicality in a poem recited on such an occasion . . . The poem defies this expectation incessantly” (156). In contrast, Mark Schoening comments, “Stevens believed that poetry pursued differently the ends it shared with other cultural practices; he believed that poetry could be distinguished from other forms of cultural activity by virtue of the means it employed to achieve common ends” (139).

3 Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 298. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

4 Bart Eeckhout’s approach is instructive; he describes Stevens’ poetry as “more than simply obsessed with staging liminal scenes and scenarios: it is also preoccupied with the limitations of the very effort to establish fixed limits. His work is generated out of the tension between possibility and impossibility, between finitude and infinitudes” (8); Eeckhout’s “reading procedure depends fundamentally on affirming the productive tension between delineation and dissemination of meanings. It should not, in other words, be confused with the New Critical ideology of ‘close reading,’ which was an ideology of unity, organicism, and isolation of the poetic artifact from its historical context that has since been rightly discredited” (9).

5 In the scope of this essay I cannot address every use of language in the poem that appears awkward, resistant, and unwieldy. Therefore, I have selected areas of the poem that have not, in my view, been fully assessed as they articulate Stevens’ central concerns.

6 See John N. Serio and Greg Foster’s Online Concordance to Wallace Stevens’ Poetry for identification of particular lines in “Description Without Place” and other poems.

7 The word “commencement” does not appear in the poem, yet is semantically slippery, referring through its root word “commence” to a beginning of experiences in future time that have not occurred. As graduates have yet to disperse to their future destinations, their “places” in life, their commencement addresses document only moments of incipience, literally “description[s] without place.”

8 She had appeared, for instance, in Harmonium in “Depression Before Spring,” “To the One of Fictive Music,” and “Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion.”
This use of “seeming” in English is now obsolete, and would have been in 1945 (OED). The more familiar word “seemly” would not allow for the complex polysemy in the poem.

See Arnd Bohm (229–30) and Filreis (153).

According to Schoening, Hamlet’s use of the word “seems” demonstrates his “tendency to think of seemings as falsehoods to be eliminated in the pursuit of being” (141). By contrast Stevens’ convoluted use of the word in “Description Without Place” “would pose an alternative” (142) to Hamlet’s, as Stevens “presents speech that has the appearance of logic without its substance, if with logic we associate clarity and resolution rather than multiplicity and diffusion” (Schoening 143).

I agree with Jacqueline Brogan: in canto I, “Stevens, that most ‘masculine’ and ‘virile’ poet of the years before, privileges a female ‘mind’ in ways that we have not seen before” (114); his “burgeoning acceptance of the ‘feminine’” finds “its greatest expressions in the late poems of his career” (115).

Angus Cleghorn notes that “long ‘e’ assonance unites ‘be and be,’ ‘These,’ ‘seemings,’ ‘see,’ ‘Hear,’ and ‘feel’ ” (154). He would have interested Stevens’ distant correspondent in Ceylon, Leonard C. van Geyzel, who had commented on Neruda’s post in Ceylon in a letter to Stevens (Filreis 177–78).

Critics generally agree that Stevens’ poem denounces Lenin’s politics; see, especially, Brogan (83).

From 1941 to 1945, in Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects, Stevens copied out several quotations about the individual creativity and the commitment of the artist. See quotations from Pasternak (75, #64), Flaubert (77, #65), Henry James (77, #68), and Giraud Riquier (79, #71).

See Brogan: Stevens vacillates “between his distrust in the power of language and his faith in its (and the poet’s) power as a necessary, even redemptive force” (83).

For critical discussions that contrast Lenin and Nietzsche, see Riddel (198); James Longenbach (282); B. J. Leggett (183–84); Schoening (147); David Jarraway (203–04). Leggett convincingly argues that Stevens here acknowledges Nietzschean perspectivism (179–84).

See Stevens’ use of “swarm” in the following passage in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: “The world washed in his imagination, / . . . The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia. / A mountainous music always seemed / To be falling and to be passing away” (146–47).

On the other hand, in canto III he chooses “more brightly” for his comparative (298). In canto II, Stevens chooses “delicate clinkings” over “delicatest” (he also writes “delicatest machine” [551] in “Romance for a Demoiselle Lying in the Grass”). See Cleghorn’s comments on the “delicate clinkings” that “pervade the poem’s logic” (153–54).

Natalie Gerber explores the sonic level of rhythm in Stevens’ late poetry, and comments, “given the vulnerability of words to the restatements and reversals of historical casualty, sustainable ‘meaning’ cannot be found in the semantic dimension of words, since semantics is subject to being emptied out as mere rhetoric” (182).

Works Cited


The “Final Finding of the Ear”: Wallace Stevens’ Modernist Soundscapes

PETER MIDDLETON

Origins

THE POEM, SAYS Wallace Stevens in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning.”1 “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” itself is a poem that presents truth, knowledge, myth, and fantasy as no more nor less than the vicissitudes of belief in all its forms. No reality independent of subjectivity is available as a measure of truth and fact, no “external rational constraints on thinking” (76), as John McDowell calls them in his philosophical study Mind and World, and therefore belief in the possibility of an “immaculate” (perfect, clean, pure, ideal) origin must presumably be just another fiction, albeit a persuasive one. By the poem’s own logic, this or any poem that “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning” cannot be a fact or, as a philosopher would say, a “justified true belief”; there are no facts, no true beliefs, only fictions, and so there may not be any immaculate beginnings except in the imagination. Although Stevens has linked “the first idea” with “immaculate beginning” rather than more mundane beginnings such as that of the poem, he has still raised the stakes for his own enterprise, so that the question—how then should the poet begin a poem that questions its own propositions in this way—becomes a powerful tacit concern for writer and reader.

Modernist poets and philosophers find beginnings difficult. They begin without beginning by starting with an “and,” or they fold the beginning back on itself in meta-discursive questionings that eventually become the entirety of the work. From A la recherche du temps perdu to Waiting For Godot, and “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” to T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets or H. D.’s Trilogy, beginnings become so absorbing they develop into peripateia and even into endings (as in Eliot’s poem). Ezra Pound’s Cantos begins in media res as if unable to escape the prolonged bewitchments of Homer’s Odyssean narrative, recounting the wandering protagonist’s retreat from Circe’s island, and simultaneously indicating that this is a narrative with a material history whose waning power is manifest as textual anachronism and unstable poetic discourse. Intermittent use of poetic abbreviations,
for instance, opens a modernist rift in what could have been merely a reenactment of Homer: the preposition “over” is immediately spelled in an anachronistic manner consonant with the poetic diction of earlier centuries (Stevens may even be alluding to these lines in the opening of his poem, since he also refers to the “slumber” of the sun):

Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day’s end.  
Sun to his slumber, shadows o’er all the ocean. . . . (7)

The two versions of “over” not only correspond to metrical demands, they measure the changing sound of modernity. As the Cantos unfold, the sound of words will often be a key to what they signify, and may involve odd spelling, special metrical effects, disappearances behind ideograms, or distortions of bibliographic codes incurred by spatial arrangements on the page. The sound of the poem’s languages will come to seem a determinant of the poem’s meanings as significant as the historical and literary source texts to which so many lines allude.

Modernist philosophers from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell also find themselves enmeshed in openings. Jacques Derrida begins his essay on the conflict between sound and sight over control of the sign, Of Grammatology, as he does so many of his works, by reflecting on the difficulty of finding a place to begin, or as he calls it in this instance, providing an “exergue.” The problem is that the science of writing he wants to embark upon cannot be written because to be scientific is to be “nonphonetic” (3), that is to suppress the sound of language by using logical symbolism, whereas the domain of enquiry, writing, is generally assumed to be fundamentally phonic because it is assumed to be the secondary projection of the sounding of thought and reason in speech (this assumption is what will be “deconstructed” by Derrida). Where can he begin then? The future of writing in an age of science is so elusive to representation that no imaginable starting point could suffice: “For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue” (5). Beginnings raise difficult questions about foundations, history, subjectivity, and sometimes surprisingly, as in the cases of Pound and Derrida, about sound. Resolving the significance of the sound of language may be necessary to open the modernist agenda. The difference between the acoustic of “o’er” and “over” matters to modernist belief, even though reason explains (in words in a language dependent on sound) that the sound of the words has no semantic significance. Why then do these modernists think it so significant for a better understanding of modernity to recognize the import of linguistic aurality, and that adequate investigation of this has not yet properly begun?

Stevens meets the challenge of beginning “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” by employing both strategies at once, throwing us into the world
of the poem without warning and making the question of natality (to borrow a term from Hannah Arendt [178]) its thematic preoccupation:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun. (329)

Like a master of ceremonies or, to follow the line of the rhetoric, like an instructor facing a pupil, the poem begins by the simple expedient of commanding a start: “Begin, ephebe.” This is not the immaculate beginning it seems. This is a moment similar to the opening of the first canto because “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” assumes that everything is already underway or in place, and all that is needed is for the anticipated reader/listener to start his or her responsive activity. We are already in the gymnasium awaiting instruction from a speaker who will be ready to deliver it, just as Pound’s wayfarers are waiting for the poem to launch the boat and begin their voyage of escape from captivity. Pound’s voyagers are fleeing Circe’s delusory enchantments; Stevens’ novice will be guided away from illusory beliefs about the world. Instruction takes the form of an injunction to readers that also interpellates us as beginners, or ephebes, and, as so often in his poetry, the unusual lexicon, in this case the word “ephebe,” creates a semantic fuzziness that enables the poem to both affirm the semantic meaning—the Greek idea of the young man training in the gymnasium for the tasks of the adult citizen—and to leave a lexical space with an aura of strangeness that the poetic context can at least partially fill with its own adumbrated meanings. Yet this is not only a continuation of a narrative that extends back as in Pound’s opening. His canto could start without us as it were, whereas Stevens’ poem appears to have been waiting for us to arrive, as if the poem can only begin because we inaugurate its beginning, a reflexivity that points to a series of attempted acoustic exergues that increasingly delay the poem from setting out anywhere. Exploring why the poem needs the reader to begin with sound will take this essay into considerations of Stevens’ prosody, the cultural history of sound, and to a utopian sounding of modernity.

On the face of it, the reader is asked to take a first step by noticing that what we call the real world is a construction of myths and concepts that we project onto a universe we cannot know directly by perception (philosophers call the idea that we do have direct knowledge of things through perception “the myth of the given”). The poem uses as its example the long history of changing perceptions of the sun in myth, religion, and science. Stevens might have in mind William Blake’s reversal of common sense when he said he saw the sun as a chorus of angels rather than a ball of fiery light. Beneath the surface of what reads as if it were philosophical instruction in a form of phenomenological reduction, however, is an accompanying narrative of phonic transformations, “less legible meanings
of sounds” (416) based initially on reflexive use of the two vowels of the word “begin.” This reflexive sonic opening reveals itself to be as involuted as Derrida’s impossible exergue once we notice how the argument handles the sequence of variations on the sounds of the embedded phonemes. The phonetic sequence ceases to be merely the audible vehicle of semantic effects, and we have an almost pataphysical discourse comprising letters used as phonetic signs comparable to mathematical symbols: “The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement” (417).

Language in everyday discourse has the capacity to refer to itself, so that speakers can offer correctives to misunderstanding and make explicit their intentions in situations where ambiguity might flourish, a linguistic feature of increasing interest to modernists throughout the past century. Gertrude Stein was one of the great exponents of this capacity. Stevens makes use of this self-referential capacity for utterances to correct and question themselves in many ways, usually semantic, but here he does something strikingly original by creating points of local self-reference to phonemes in the poem, to their sounds and then to possible semantic values detached from the syntax of the containing sentence. Read from this perspective, overlaid on the borrowed phenomenology is a sonic argument in the form of acoustic images through which equivalences and transformations based on sound values unfold as if they were extended equations in poetic form. This effect is hard to describe, though based on a familiar feature of the history of poetry: the repetition of a specific vowel sound or phoneme across lines and stanzas generates internal “rhyming” that then creates spatial organizations for the eye (and temporal connections for the ear) that produce their own equivalences of words with different semantic values, instigating connections that may not be explicit (or even implicit) in the semantic organization of the syntax and propositional forms of the sentence. Stevens exploits this infrastructural practice more than most by offering a libretto of strong reasoning, and by locating key phonemes at points where their musical phrasing could be considered as the subjects of propositions.

His predecessors knowingly created internal rhymes that set up tiered meanings in the form of expectations, actions, and images that counter the incremental word-by-word linear unfolding of the poem, but Stevens goes further. He attempts to cross the barrier between semantic meaning and the sounds of the words of the poem. We are all familiar with how this can happen in a song, where the notes can seem to carry the meanings of certain words in the lyric, and the words become “musicalized” as it were (though musicologists argue about just how this happens and what it signifies for the aesthetic [Nicholls 2007]). Stevens does some of his most striking work in this first section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” with the internal sounds of the word “begin.” Although it is made up of two syllables, be /bi/ and gin /gIn/, the second syllable has a subcomponent in /in/ that has almost as strong a semantic recognition as be. These
entities *be* and *in* that bookend the velar /g/ both carry familiar semantic values as well as most of the stress placed on the sequence of letters. If we think of *begin* in this manner as made up of two dominant components and the hinge of the velar /g/, the first thing that emerges to view is that the young man is identified with the opening syllable *be* through the three repetitions of the vowel in the words used to identify him, *begin ephebe*, just as musical notes and phrases are sometimes associated with specific characters in opera. The first three words almost say “Begin, ephebe, *be*” because the eye first sees the *b* (a letter with identical pronunciation to *be*) that starts the third word *by*, and then the reader goes through a liminal process of hearing the injunction “*be*” (exist, be yourself, be present), and then replacing it with the */ɑI/* sound as a slightly dissonant note in place of the expected */i/*. This falling away from a hinted-at *be* suggests that the ephebe (and the reader who is compelled by the vocative address to identify with this beginner) does not yet quite know *how to be*. This effect is reinforced by the stuttering character of the word “ephebe,” in which an almost audible further repetition produces the missing verb *be*.

Now the other phoneme, /n/, comes into play. This alveolar nasal and its close relation, the velar nasal /ŋ/, associate the key words in the first line: “perceiving” and “begin.” These words display the high front vowel phonemes /i/ and /I/. The first is connected with the action of perceiving or noticing. The second is connected both with the visual occurrence of *in* in “perceiving” (where the graphemic sequence *in* resembles the phonemic sequence */iŋ*/), and with the *in* (or */in/) that forms the prefix of “invention,” “inverted,” and “inconceivable.” It also elicits attention to transformations of sound. The sound of the word “*begin*” is transformed into the sound of the phrase “the sun,” so that the sharpness of the opening vowels /i/ and /I/ is muted to the softness of */ə/ and */Λ/*, while the hardness of the /g/ becomes the light consonant /s/. From here a series of complex internal full and partial rhymes on the word “sun”—“man,” “seen,” “one”—and on “ephebe”—“Phoebus,” “expelled us,” “cleanliness”—and then more elaborate echoes of the */Λ/ of “sun”—“umber,” “slumber,” “autumn,” “flourisher,” and “Must” (329–30), lead us toward two climaxes. First is the death of Phoebus, which is also the death or silencing of an aspect of the phonetic resonances of the word “ephebe.” The “*us*” associated with “*be*” is erased. Then comes the final stanza:

> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be. (330)

By repeating the phrase “the sun” twice, the poem makes use of the familiar effect of repetition to retune cognitive attention to the material words themselves away from their meaning, and the mind hears momentarily that the project for “the sun” is to become just the words “the sun.”
The concluding clause of the final sentence folds everything back to the start of the whole section by repeating the first and last syllables, /bi/ and /in/, without the intervening consonant across the enjambment, so that the sun now “bear[s] no name” and can be indicated only by the sounds of the opening word, begin. Then the remaining syllables of the final line invert the order of the two syllables, /bi/ and /in/, as if to indicate by this reversal that there is a residual difficulty of (knowing, thinking, understanding) what it is both “to be,” that is to exist, and to be an ephebe, to be there to start the poem. We are caught in the difficulty of that opening word, now broken in two and inverted so that we end on the same syllable with which we started, as if we have still not begun.

Sound symbolism in poetry often shades away from the obvious to the “ghostlier demarcations” (106) of ever-receding harmonics of significant sense, and Stevens is a master of the game of tantalizing the reader with increasingly attenuated traces of symbolism. The demarcations of “begin” that I have discerned are likely to be, for the reader, adumbrations rather than spotlit saliences in awareness. No wonder many critics find it simpler to allude to the musicality of the whole poem. The temptation to set aside such possibilities of meaning and call the overall poetic effect musicality is something that Stevens’ poems work with, as he plays on a reader’s uncertainty about the semantic significance of such sound matrices at the “bluntest barriers” (343), as he does with the semantic roominess created by words such as “ephebe” and “Phoebus.” This use of reflexivity to create a series of almost mathematical transformations of the acoustic image occurs throughout “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” though usually on a less extended scale. The first and second sections of “It Must Change” pick up the ontological implications of the verb be by introducing a scene of the “birds and the bees” in a flowery landscape watched over by an anachronistic angel, in which the pun on “bee” and “be” is at first submerged in favor of the celebration of this cloyingly sentimental poetic trope, which then loses conviction in the final three stanzas (“the distaste we feel for this withered scene” [337]).

One response to these ambivalences would be to try to fix the best elements of the opening pastoral scene. A stylized figure, “the President,” therefore, “ordains the bee to be / Immortal” (337), and we hear echoes of the opening of the previous section in this demand that pun be made literal and permanent truth. Bad puns are cleverly used by Stevens to reflect on those associated with them, as if such crude uses of verbal sound to create semantic equivalences were a sign of delusory ideology. Homonymic play on “chord” and “cord” works to belittle Christian myth by association with the crude art of the pun—“A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell” (346). The failure of the President’s strategy of governing the world is made especially evident in his wish that the curtains be adjusted “to a metaphysical t” (337). Playing off the idiom “done to a t” by adding the apparently unnecessary adjective cleverly exposes the absur-
dity of the desire embodied by the President to make letters carry meta-
physical significance. Yet sound, even the sound of the letter *t*, does carry
great potential of some kind, possibly metaphysical, as the final line of
this section implicitly suggests: “this / Booming and booming of the new-
come bee” (338). Does “being” also “boom,” does the world of being, the
world of to “be,” also manifest itself through the sound of even a syllable
such as /bi/? Other passages seem to suggest so. The otherwise discon-
certing account of the “mystic marriage in Catawba” (346) in section IV of
“It Must Give Pleasure” depends on the degree to which the “marriage-
place” (347) that Bawda and the captain loved was called Catawba, which
is a sonic merger of the words “captain” and “Bawda,” and the semantic
context leaves no doubt that this is an Edenic condition. What is striking
is that the achievement of this utopian prospect should be projected partly
through phonetic effects.

The most obvious poetic strategy to foreground the phonetic dimension
of syllables and words is manifest in Stevens’ relatively unusual preoccu-
pation with nonsense syllables that are usually onomatopoetic and often
neologisms. The Arabian’s “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,” the wood-dove’s
“hoobla-hoo,” the ocean’s “hoo” (331), the birds singing “Ké-ké” (340), and
the cymbals ringing with “shoo-shoo-shoo” (347) are typical of a practice
that extends across his poetry. These cries manifest passionate expressivity
that does not enter the linguistic “logical space of reasons,” and yet does
participate in the intensive sound patterning. The Arabian’s cry climaxes
a sequence that begins with the sea, proceeds in a more complex way in the
bird song, and then hovers on the borderline of sense with its final syllable
*hoo*. Not all the nonsense words are so intrusively obvious. Some of the
phatic cries are such familiar poetic devices, the “O,” “Oh,” and “Ah” from
a long poetic tradition, that they are often almost invisible to a reader who
is likely to hear them as no more than prosodic fillers.

The interdependence of two different modes of generating meanin-
gfulness, discursive reasoning and the complex encoding of phonemes, which
constitutes the full significance of the opening section, sets the pace for
the rest of the poem and gives the reader a first insight into the mod-
ernist dilemmas that arise from questions about the authority of writing,
the nature of knowledge and being, and the role of language that trouble
Stevens. Why then does Stevens opt for a textual strategy that relies so
heavily on phonetic sound to decouple assertoric force and textual logic?
Is he for instance trying to manifest the surfaces of discourse and decon-
struct the hierarchies of writing and speech, or are there other histories of
sound and language that create this imperative for him? Anca Rosu in her
study of sound in Stevens attempts to reconcile these alternatives in her
suggestion that Stevens aims to discredit “traditional oppositions between
sound and sense” by working with sound “to dissolve a certain episte-
mological order traditionally associated with poetic representation while
summoning into existence another—the unrepresented, the (otherwise)
unrepresentable—in its place” (71). At the close of a discussion of the “Co-
median as the Letter C,” she argues that “eventually all requirements of
narrative are fulfilled by its quasi-musical patterns” (135). These are help-
ful insights into Stevens’ ambitions, though I think they overestimate his
success at evoking the unrepresentable, and too readily assimilate him to
the poststructuralist reading of modernist representation. Expressiveness
is deeply important to Stevens, and he is aware of the limits of the concept
of representation. We should look in Stevens for the ways in which sound
patterning not only adds an additional cognitive layer but also alludes to
the histories that may be audible there too. Intimations set loose by hold-
ing the reader’s attention to the sound of the first word “begin” will turn
out to be more important than any proposition offered by this section of
the poem, and yet it will not be evident that the poem itself quite realizes
why this should be so, other than as a sign that the value of poetry as
manifest in its beautiful sound can remain strong even in time of war.

PARTICULARS

Stevens always celebrated sound in his poetry. Sound is a sign of vital-
ity, a manifestation of energy, whether of activity, thought, or feeling, so
that he can describe the entire universe in almost Pythagorean terms as
“The complicate, the amassing harmony” (348). The music of his phrasing,
the choice of sound and music as themes in many poems, the innum-
erable passing allusions to the noise made by creatures and objects of
all kinds, his notorious nonsense syllables—all show him reveling in the
energies manifest as the sounds of life. Expressivity requires sound. “The
poem is the cry of its occasion” (404), he writes, assuming that an “occa-
sion” would normally manifest itself as an involuntary expressive sound.
“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” concludes that “The less legible
meanings of sounds” are “the edgings and inchings of final form, / The
swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement” (416–17), and these
sounds matter because “reality” is not a “solid” so much as “a shade that
traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (417). Such deliquescent,
elusive states of the world reveal themselves in sounds at the edge of lan-
guage that may not be immediately functional and exact phonemes.

The entire development of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” depends
on associations with sound and its many forms, especially music and
voice, and the cosmos is repeatedly imagined in acoustic terms. Part IV
of “It Must Be Abstract” deliberately blurs images of cloud, pedagogue,
coulisse, bare board, and rose in a vast Turneresque void, where

Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them. (332)

The universe is as much constructed of sound as of light, and this noise and
music provide the seeds from which human perceptions and ideas grow.
The obvious pun on “Abysmal” (meaning belonging to the sublime abyss, or poorly played) and the more tacit visual pun on pips (pips as in the seed of a fruit or the signal from a telephone, plus a visual echo of the expected word pipes that could belong to a mighty instrument of the abyss such as an organ) also indicate an instability of value here. William Empson’s discussion of “wit” in Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” notes a repeated “ominous idea that the lowest is an exact parallel of the highest” (97), a connection that can also be found in Stevens. Empson argues that such ominous equivalences show that for Pope, “The contradictions of his self-contempt and self-justification are erected into a solid and intelligent humility before the triumphs and social usefulness possible to his art” (97). Similar tensions are evident in Stevens, who is less confident about the cultural successes of poetic art, though they are constellationed around the myriad valuations and associations attached to sound as a modern form of “wit.”

Later in this first section, Stevens hints at the difficulties of comprehending the world as sound when “MacCullough” is glimpsed by the sea, “lounging,” then worryingly “Drowned,” and then “reading in the sound” (334–35) in a process that leads to some sort of epiphany:

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken. (335)

The next section is dismissive of such “romantic intoning” (evoking the pantheistic and spiritual aspirations of romanticism through an image of the religious chanting of a psalm or prayer), even if it is better than “reason’s click-clack” (335) (evoking the sounds of a machine such as a typewriter or an adding machine, both familiar in an insurance office), an argument relying closely on two evaluations of sound both of which are normally pejorative, though the second more so than the first.

“It Must Give Pleasure” begins with a rejection of a certain kind of communitas based on joyful celebratory singing, music and speech, that tacitly assumes that these sounds can be metonymic of society enacting rituals of self-formation. Canon Aspirin, in his attempt to comprehend the universe, is aware that although the night may be “far underneath” his sight, it is “audible in the mountain of / His ear, the very material of his mind” (348), and as he lets his thoughts expand outward he feels able to grasp “The complicate, the amassing harmony” that is the world, a world manifest as sound. The poem is ambivalent about Aspirin’s achievement, continuing on in the next section to contrast his actual achievement with a hypothetical receptivity to the world that enables a person “To find the real” (349), and this means, at least for the angel, something paradoxical:

Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound. (349)
It is not atoms known through their radiating light that comprise this universe; this is a universe constructed from a vast aggregation of sounds audible when the mind is receptively silent, presumably because it is not cogitating. If we want to understand (to be absorbed by the proper fiction of) the material, actual world in which we are embedded, we must listen to its melody as much as or more than we gaze at its visible yet nebulous shapes. When the poem begins to work to a close and the narrator becomes self-conscious and slightly self-mocking (saying for instance that he enjoys “Enjoying angels” (350), where the repetition of “enjoy” lends a certain silliness to the admission), it is ordinary birdsong, that staple of poetry (and aesthetic philosophy), that brings him back to earth. Birdsong is repetitive and the poem proposes that mastery of repetition, one of the key elements of music, is the highest human achievement.

I think we should find this extensive investment in the importance of sound for a viable understanding of the world (normally conceptualized through visual metaphors such as world, picture or view) strange because the idea that sound might constitute the world not only runs counter to the dominant scientific world view of matter that it is comprised of particles and forces, but also because our dominant metaphors for comprehending the world, even in the arts and humanities, largely draw upon space, time, building, and sight. Sound is secondary. It requires a material medium for its transmission, most of it is mere noise, its role in speech has been resolutely treated as mechanical or diacritical rather than semantic and cognitive, and, although our culture greatly values music, we lack the rich descriptive vocabulary for musical sound that we have for visual appearances and colors. Why then did Stevens invest so much belief in sound as a source of value, energy, and significance? Why should the ephebe begin his or her education by reflecting on the sounds of the word that interpellates him or her? I shall suggest these and other questions about Stevens’ thematizing of sound will be answered only by looking at the modern history of sound, and that much of what makes his poetry of continuing interest is actually its failure to make this investment fully work. It remains utopian. Stevens at times appears to think that musical sound is the most evident symptom of the geist (“the heart / That is the common, the bravest fundament” that exults “with its great throat” [344]), though the poetry mostly has little to say about the collective historical work that creates language and culture all the way down to the expressive sounds either made by people or given significance by them.

HISTORIES

Why did Stevens invest so much belief in a cosmology of sound? Rather than no answers, there seem to be too many. A first response is likely to be along the lines that his poetry is corrective to what he and many modern thinkers believe has been an overvaluation of sight by reminding us again and again that the full realization of seeing requires aurality too. The el-
ders watching Susanna comprehend what they see as both the vision and a concomitant mingling of bass and pizzicati notes, and when she notices them watching her she experiences this gaze as accompanied by a dissonant music: “A cymbal crashed, / And roaring horns” (73). The real world is operatic. Poems, says “The Creations of Sound,” ought to “make the visible a little hard / To see” (275) and by implication easier to hear, and they have the potential to do this because listening is a cognitive activity. A poem’s music can “eke out the mind / On peculiar horns, themselves eked out / By the spontaneous particulars of sound” (275). The idea here is that the poem can help the mind “eke” out its scarce cognitive resources, especially when caught on the horns of a dilemma, by the way it provides a music that can sustain the mind’s activity. Poetic music is in turn supported by all the fine grainy particulars of the acoustic activity of a poem, detail that encodes the concrete particulars on which the generalizations, or in more traditional terms, the universals of knowledge rest.

Asserting the authority of the aural is also one of Stevens’ strategies for affirming secularization. He returns again and again to the notion that the modern world needs to think its way beyond religious myths, and each time he assay this idea he alludes to one of the oldest justifications for music and the importance of sound: its religious significance. Both Judaism and Christianity value sound, speech, and music above the images presented to the eye. The mistrust of “graven images” and icons, the many monitory biblical tales of people deceived by what they see into acts of lust and destruction, the association between spirit and speech or music have counterparts in Stevens’ metaphysics: a poem should “make the visible a little hard / To see” and by implication, easier to hear. To achieve this he has to give sound an aura and acknowledge its “spirit”: “Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought” (105), when listening to the singer at Key West. As Vincent Pecora argues, “the secularization through which magic or myth is eliminated by reason may never in fact be complete” (22).

Stevens’ satirical pictures of Christian and Graeco-Roman ideas of heaven, for instance, ridicule images of spiritual aspiration by exposing their music as ribald comedy, full of noise and crude rhythms. Their sublime is best represented by onomatopoetic words—“tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk” (47)—words whose lack of meaning or effaced meaning (“tank,” though reputedly semantic, struggles against the rhythm and rhyme to retain any semantic value) is counterbalanced by their insistent rhythm within the line’s metric. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” he is more subtle though even more damning in the passage about Christian myth: “A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell / And bade the sheep carouse” (346). The Christian message of resurrection and redemption is represented as the provision of music for orgiastic celebration and through the pun that echoes William Blake’s account of the effect of the church on natural feeling: “priests in black gowns were
walking their rounds, / And binding with briars my joys and desires” (212). The problem for the poetry will be that it too will rely on “tremendous chords.” As Pecora says: “One might then conclude that the society that produces Enlightenment never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose, and continually translates, or transposes, them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting, versions of its religious inheritance” (22). Although it would be too sweeping to say that Stevens transposes Christian investment in voice and music into “ever more refined and immanent” modes of articulation that also distort thought about epistemology, cognition, and the material world, the aptness of this judgment to some of his poetry alerts us to what we need to examine in order better to understand his “keener sounds.”

This secularization is manifest in his heavy and anachronistic use of interjections, those “ohs” and “ahs” that belong in the same broad category of sound-words as the nonsense syllables. The British poet J. H. Prynne identifies Stevens as writing at the end of a long tradition of reliance on what he calls the “emphatical” (135) (a term he derives from William Hazlitt). Discussing “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” Prynne remarks that “the muting is what holds the most delicately low pitch momentarily free of its surrounding limits,” and that Stevens attempts to “mark the tone of emphasis with a device protected by the traditions of poetic figure from seeming also the full responsibility of the poet” (169). Earlier in the lecture, Prynne shows that the use of the interjection “oh” draws on a history of poetic practice that relies on its simultaneous use as apostrophe to a deity or other power, and its role as an exclamation prompted by strong passion that cannot reach full semantic articulation at this moment of outburst. Prynne proposes that interjections such as “ah” and “oh” might be “markers for the emphatical compunction of a lost sacred language over-pitched in secular vacancy” (166), and though he concludes that there can be no such generalization about all usages of this type of exclamation, a skillful poet using exclamatory language may offer “a form of acknowledgement and dialectical holding to the locus of a demanding but possible truth, at least as much as simply the expression of some feeling about a moment particularly stressed by the pressures of experience” (167). Whether they are instances of secularizing taxidermy or living instances of belief, the interjection or “emphatical” can also “convoke the currencies of previous usage by quoting recursively the power of poetic speech itself” (168). When Stevens asks in section IV of “Academic Discourse at Havana,” “Is the function of the poet here mere sound” (116), we might hear this as akin to the work of the musician, bringing to audibility again a music that has helped constitute his art as a tradition.

In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the interjection is used to signal strong feeling. “O my companion” (339) concludes the celebration of what could be Blake’s “contraries.” The section that contrasts the desire of
the birds for recognition from their environment expressed in a comically clumsy reflexive verb—“bethou me as you blow”—with a natural cry apparently lacking linguistic significance, “ké,” introduces this cry with an interjection: “Ah, ké!” (340). The result is to imbue the “ké” with some of the virtues of the “Ah,” comparing them as similar utterances of strong passion, and creating possible parallels between the poetic intensities of the human interjection with that of the bird. The importance of this sound word is made more evident in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” a poem that also uses this same interjection at a key moment. After the first two sections, which set the scene for the whole long poem, sections in which the audience calls for epistemological perfection from the poet and the poet demurs, saying that representations of the world are more like cadavers than living simulations, the third section begins with the pregnant word “Ah” (135). It is notoriously difficult to give a dictionary definition of such labile words but there is usually a suggestion of hesitation, of relief, of a second thought perhaps underlying the awe and regret heard in such an outburst. From the start of the poem, oral emphasis is crucial to the meaning of the dialectical stanzas. “They said, ‘You have a blue gui-
tar’” (135; my emphasis). Readers have to become aware that the color word is so significant that the stressed syllable of the iamb requires double emphasis to indicate that the guitar, the symbol of poetry, is somehow restricted in its range of expression to blueness. By starting the third section with “Ah,” Stevens enacts his point. Sound is all, whether of blue guitars, poetry, or the world. In all three cases, Stevens is also reflecting on the deeper implications of a rejection of transcendence, and the interjection is, in Prynne’s words, indeed “a marker for the boundary of one discourse where it is momentarily exceeded by another” (168). We have to rely on companions, hear the absence or loss of human meaning in the birdsong, or “play man number one” (135), and then deal with the implications.

“Is there a poem that never reaches words” (343), asks section IX of “It Must Change.” Stevens’ use of emphatical language as part of a wider strategy of secularization suggests that his nonsense syllables, whose role in his poetry has always fascinated readers and critics, might also function in this manner. If we connect this paralanguage with the history of conceptions of neologisms, interjections, and nonce onomatopoeia, we can see that these usages often have roots in cultural instability, and that such heavy emphasis on sound emerges from the poet’s difficulties in articulating the profound historical disturbances through which he lived. Heavy reliance on neologisms of any kind is relatively rare among modernist poets and where it is used, the poet often draws on a background in sound poetry for legitimation (Maggie O’Sullivan is probably the most prominent contemporary practitioner in this field). Neologisms are viewed with some suspicion by lexicographers, grammarians, and literary critics who find them evidence of a range of moral and aesthetic failings. Webster is explicit about the dangers of neologizing, and defines a neologism as ei-
ther “a new word, usage, or expression” or “a usu. compound word coined by a psychotic and meaningless to the hearer.” The nonce word may be a sign of madness. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) is not much more encouraging: “Neologisms (new-coined words) tend now to be associated with novelty more than freshness, and sometimes with strained effects” (Preminger and Brogan 690). H. W. Fowler sums up common-sense beliefs about neologisms at the start of his classic account of good usage, *The King’s English*:

A “nonce-word” (and the use might be extended to “nonce-phrase” and “nonce-sense”—the latter not necessarily, though it may be sometimes, equivalent to nonsense) is one that is constructed to serve a need of the moment. The writer is not seriously putting forward his word as one that is for the future to have an independent existence; he merely has a fancy to it for this once. The motive may be laziness, avoidance of the obvious, love of precision, or desire for a brevity or pregnancy that the language as at present constituted does not seem to him to admit of. (29)

Fowler does not entertain the most salient motive animating Stevens’ inventive phonemes, the interest in onomatopoetic words that project moments when pure sound emerges awkwardly within discourse. His insistence that their use indicates a confidence in the value of the writing does fit Stevens’ case, however, and so too does his list of ordinary motives. Stevens strives to avoid the obvious because he wants to remove the accretions of habitual association from words and perceptions, and he highly values verbal precision for this reason, trying always to achieve what Fowler calls “pregnancy” (a gender politics of neologisms raises its head), or what we might call the quality of intensity. I cannot imagine anyone would call Stevens lazy, although few poets so insistently return to images of indolence (the exponents of the “tunk-a-tunk-tunk” sound are paradigms of it), and sometimes his sound words are intended to convey various forms of self-indulgent imagination.

Fowler’s animadversions draw our attention to the transgressive features of neologisms in terms of a folk psychology, but they also feature in other contexts as markers of cultural and social transgression because they expose the wiring of the intersubjectivity of language. It is worth emphasizing that neologisms are pervasive in everyday life, as new slang or parapraxes that gain local currency. Ron Silliman argues that usually in poetry “nonsense is a particularly complex instance of sense itself, not its erasure or Other” and that poems can “exploit the social category of the non-word as an aspect of their own agency.” He adds, “The onomatopoetic loses its force if we don’t acknowledge its special condition and thus becomes ‘only’ a word” (156). To use a neologism is to engage in a social practice
with potential consequences for collective life, and this special condition includes the implications of its transgression of the linguistic norm. Daniel Rosenberg has recently argued that the preoccupation with neology during the French Revolution marks the “consciousness of change so crucial to the period” (367), and that its opponents thought that language was one of the most active zones of conflict. The dictionary of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, La Néologie, ou vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles (1801), attempted to promote change through neologisms. Mercier writes: “Neologers are everywhere, in the market halls just as in the Roman Forum, in the stock exchange, just as in the Senate. They are everywhere where liberty makes genius fruitful, where the imagination operates without constraint upon the models of nature, where thought can enlighten authority and defy tyranny” (Rosenberg 376). The extreme case of Mercier suggests that neologisms are signs of social instability, of aspirations to intervene in the historical process. He was particularly aware of the significance of onomatopoeia and its alleged role in the origins of language in pre-civilized peoples as Philippe Roger points out. Roger cites Mercier’s affirmation, “je serai un barbare,” and then comments that this “résume au plus juste le projet néologique de Mercier” [“summarizes as tersely as possible the neologiistic project of Mercier”] (346). Stevens’ poetry has many images of such primitivism: the Arabian can be imagined to say “je serai un barbare” by uttering his “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla how.”

The secularizing aim at work in Stevens’ uses of sound in poetry is therefore bound up with utopian impulses and with his critique of the collective life of modernity. With this in mind we can turn to other historical and aesthetic reasons for Stevens’ immersion in sound. The first of these I want to consider is the possibility that by pursuing “the less legible meaning of sounds,” he is deliberately putting legibility under pressure. Stevens may well be trying to resist the cognitive subsumption of the work of art under a philosophical or cultural paraphrase by retaining a resistant stratum of sound in the same manner that visual artists use brushwork and texture to resist easy pictorialization of the work by viewers. Many commentators on modernist aesthetics, notably Theodor Adorno, have drawn attention to modernist strategies of resistance to interpretation, and especially to their fragility in the face of dogmas of reason and ideology. Writing about primarily visual modes of poetic illegibility, Craig Dworkin concludes his study by summarizing the paradoxes for interpretation in stark terms: “Reading the illegible,” he writes, “nullifies its own account in the precise moment of its construction and obliterates the very object it would claim to have identified, creating a new space of erasure which cannot itself be read” (155). Earlier in his discussion, however, he opens a possibility that I believe can guide us in tracing the illegibility of sound in Stevens’ prosody: partially unreadable texts inhabit “the threshold at which writing passes between the field of human language and the inhumanness of sheer materiality” (82). This is what we witnessed in the opening of “Notes Toward
a Supreme Fiction” as control of attention swung between the quasi-philosophical argument and the abstract music of the phonemes. Stevens’ text also displayed something else: the strange effects of diminished legibility. Instead of two sharply defined zones, intelligible language and unreadable materiality, we noticed that the pressure of proximity gave the sounds a narrative significance, and the cognitive ideas a material sheen. The old philosopher dying in Rome and deprived of ordinary vocal eloquence still manages utterance “without speech, / The loftiest syllables among loftiest things” (433), and the city reciprocates by abjuring any possibility “that mercy should be a mystery / Of silence” in favor of its choral bells and “reverberations clinging to whisper still” (434).

Many of Dworkin’s most striking instances of illegibility arise from technological blottings such as overprinting and exaggerated dimensions of typography. Stevens’ interest in sound is also deeply entwined with the technological developments of his time, especially those in the field of recording and transmission. He was a child of the recording revolution and the cinema, living through an age when the talking machines began to dissemble voices, music, and moving images from one spatio-temporal location and relocate them in another, where they no longer carried with them the authority of a presence. Many of the cues that enable a listener to gauge the commitment of a speaker to the truth of what is being affirmed in a verbal exchange are either non-verbal (posture, proximity, knowledge of the person’s prior record as a reliable speaker) or hard to capture with all but the best recording and transmission equipment (such as the more fleeting aspects of intonation and pitch that indicate different degrees of commitment to what is said such as seriousness or sarcasm). Recorded music and voices, as well as broadcast programming, was still new enough to offer relatively poor audio reproduction and therefore be open to instabilities of reception, and more importantly still, to feel if not invasive, at least transgressive of boundaries. Andre Millard cites an advertising executive saying: “American businessmen, because of radio, are provided with a latch key to nearly every house in the nation” (172). Thoughtful users of the new technologies lived through a period of history in which the effusions of music, voices, recognizable sounds, and noise were disembedded from their points of generation, so that voices did come out of the floors, walls, and ceilings (274), called forth by the science of the day. Adjusting to the idea that this could happen to the voice meant reimagining how expression works, and particularly how to understand what happens to the sincerity on which truthfulness partly rests, if source and emitter of sound are severed by a distance traversed by electrons. Should a poet behave like X of “The Creations of Sound”?

If the poetry of X was music,
So that it came to him of its own,
Without understanding, out of the wall
Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom
That was their element, we should not know

That X is an obstruction, a man
Too exactly himself, and that there are words
Better without an author, without a poet. . . (274)

This enigmatic, abstract poem critiques the poet X, who presents poems as imitations of direct speech, concluding:

We do not say ourselves like that in poems.
We say ourselves in syllables that rise
From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak. (275)

The principle behind the metaphors of poetic inspiration in this poem as an external force is traditional enough (think of the Aeolian harp, for instance), yet these specific metaphors of sound radiating through a building could not have been written in the world before gramophones, radios, and telephones, instruments that all create the impression of speech and music coming out of solid objects, out of the walls, the very air of the modern world. One of the leading magazines for the new industry created by Edison was evocatively known as Talking Machine World (Millard 74). Some critics read this poem as a poststructuralist statement avant la lettre, a critical strategy that, as Marjorie Perloff notes, has enjoyed considerable currency (57). Susan Stewart reads it as a reminder of “Adorno’s point that in the greatest lyric works it is language itself that is speaking and changing,” because the language of the lyric “is already waiting to speak us” (89). The poem certainly projects a human condition in which sounds emerge from the world all around us, noises as well as words, and that we think at least as much with sound as we do with what we see, but this is presented as a material rather than a transcendental condition.

Although this “talking machine world” saturated with sound is not explicitly identified as a modern one, the insistence on sound emerging from the structures of our habitation is a modern perception. The description of what we usually call the implied author of the poem as a “being of sound” relies on the familiarity with those other “being[s] of sound” (275) who inhabit telephones, record players, and radios. What distinguishes this poem from the poststructuralist conception that the subject is spoken by language is that this poem is more materialist than that; this poem concentrates on the blurring of ontological boundaries between self, body, and sound in the modern world. The given that we start with is ambient sound, not the linguistic abstraction conceived by recent literary theory. When Stevens writes, “The poem is the cry of its occasion” (404), he affirms this because he lives in a “talking machine world” where the
sound of an “occasion” can be recorded so that its cry can be played back later when the occasion is no longer extant. Perhaps he could be a Max Planck of poetry who could find new modes of representing the radiation of sound. (Planck, who proposed the first quantum radiation model of energy, is a “symbol of ourselves” [866], Stevens told a lecture audience.) Perhaps he could be the poet-scientist of these rays of sound “that rise / From the floor.” This would be the sort of ambition one might expect in a world where sound radiated from the same type of electronic machines that produced the new rays.

Thinking of the real as a sonic landscape might also be an understandable reaction to the growing volume of modernity, its dynamics made almost tangible in the distancing of sound from what it expressed. Our cities hum not only with cars but also with air-conditioning fans, and our listening space is saturated with electronically reproduced sounds of music and voices transmitted from elsewhere, so that almost wherever we are in any social space “a familiar music of the machine / Sets up its Schwärmerei” (its raptures or effusions) (334). Tim Armstrong, in a recent essay that links Schopenhauer, the player piano, and Stevens, argues that his poetry offers itself as a “serio-comic surrender to the machinery” (17) in its attitude to the “integrative function” (11) of music. Music enables us to work through the temporality of memory, of the disjunction between perception and recollection, a disjunction that the recording machine also reintegrates. (Armstrong notes that Adorno claims that a recording textualizes the music that it preserves.) Poetry itself becomes a kind of recording machine in this account, which privileges music as the paradigm of the human relation to the temporalities of sound, and leaves somewhat open questions about other types of sound and other features of sound than those active within memory, especially the expressive.

Tim Armstrong rightly links recordings with the philosophical theme of repetition, and this is one of the culminating themes of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” as well as a dominant characteristic of the opening of the poem. Its mastery is the characteristic of the “man-hero” (350). When Stevens uses his repetitions of sound, his “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla how” of sound, he is working with a surprisingly wide palette of cultural implications. These social energies include secularization, the modernist reflexivity of the medium, the impact of new technologies of communication, fears about the loss of rationality, and desires for radical social change. Hearing them is difficult partly because their legibility is often tested and partly because Stevens tends to be averse to explicit recognition of the intellectual and collective labor that makes audibility possible.

Sound as a mode of thought, the significance of sound for the long cultural process of secularization, utopian aspirations expressed in words at the borders of sense, the shock of immersion in a new world of music, and voices recorded and transmitted for replay in the absence of the originators, a pataphysical cosmology of sound—as Stevens works through these
sometimes clashing influences, he repeatedly risks and admits failure. Sight, for instance, enjoys cultural dominance for good reason. How persuasive is a cosmology of sound? Its association with angels and “withered” poetic tropes often suggests that the poet is uncertain. Emphatical language and onomatopoetic neologisms also embrace failure, as we have seen. Some aspects of the new capacity for sonic reproduction are also troubling, especially their implications for confidence about sound as a sign of vitality. Stevens wants sound to be a sign that something lively is happening here and now, either because living things are active or the inanimate world is releasing dynamic energy. If sound is mere reproduction, it might indicate only a fossil vitality. The new communications technologies also make evident the problems of legibility or inaudibility, whether as the hiss of radio carrier waves drowning the station, or static and damage creating crackles. Sound can drown sense. By choosing to begin with a section addressed to the ephebe/reader, in which phonemes become half-legible subjects and predicates of the syntax, Stevens begins with the recursive complexities and potential limitations of the necessarily phonetic language of poetry and the challenge of modernist sound. No wonder the poem becomes so inconclusive.

**AFTERWORD**

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” not only has difficulty with beginnings that can only be projected through reflexive attention to the sound of language and the modern languages of sound, it also has difficulty with endings, notoriously offering two endings, almost in the manner of an experimental novel. Section IX is often taken as stating one of what will have to pass for the resolutions that can be offered by the poem, that our aim should be to master repetition rather than yearn for ideal states of permanence such as are embodied in the concepts of angels and origins. Section X strays into gender stereotyping that readers today are likely to be made uneasy by: the “Fat girl” whose “evasions” must be checked, the apparent embodiment of emotion, growth, nature, and even irrationality (351). The first person is more strongly evident in this section than anywhere else in the poem, as if it is now possible to offer the authority of the poet’s own authentic introspection as evidence for the poem’s contention that poets and moderns will continue to create fictions, imagining that they have direct access to the world given by the senses. As a result, even the supposedly knowledgeable poet, who began by instructing the comparatively ignorant ephebe, now concludes by admitting to being an ephebe himself, creating not solar myths of Phoebus, but something equally abstracted, a “fluent mundo,” no longer “revolving except in crystal” (351). Just as the opening section balanced a confident, intellectual argument with a counterpoint of sonic equations that undercut the authoritative stance of the address, so here at the end similar instabilities arise.
In the second ending, the poet appears to try to justify poetry in a time of world war, explaining that the soldiers need what poets produce. Images of this necessity, however, are disturbing, both in the scale of their claims and their latent violence. “The soldier is poor without the poet’s lines,” we are told, and so far so good, but then more troubling notes enter, first a note of self-contempt (“His petty syllabi”) and then an image that contains troubling resonances: “the sounds that stick, / Inevitably modulating, in the blood” (352). Bullets and blades stick in the blood, and the stickiness of blood is usually evident only in the presence of a wound. Stevens and his readers will also be aware that this is a war in which “blood” as a metaphor of race and kinship has poisonous associations. It is hard to know how to respond to this complex constellation of meanings, and that I think is part of its point. The final section, far from being utopian, reminds us of the collective historical work that creates language and culture all the way down to the expressive sounds either made by people or given significance by them. This historical work is prone to failure as well as achievement. Gender oppression or nationalist strife can lead to terrible destruction, and these too are part of the world of sound. If the ending feels as much like failure as a conclusive ending, this is because the poem has circled back to its beginning. Phoebus’s death has been joined by those of many others, and yet the poem still wants us to stick to the guiding conception of the world as “fluent,” a universe that articulates itself through sound.

I want to end by invoking a recent poem that reflects back on the complex legacy of Stevens’ ambitious failures to create a counter-modernity of sound. Susan Howe has given as much thought as any living poet to Stevens’ concern with the legibility of sound at the barriers of sense, leading her to title one section of an early poem, *Defenestration of Prague,* “Speeches at the Barriers.” In her recent collection, *Souls of the Labadie Tract,* Howe includes a poem sequence, “118 Westerly Terrace,” based on the daily walks Stevens took from his house to his office, using images and phrases from those poems in which he ponders elusive presences at the edge of sense. She is particularly interested in his legacy to other poets, and in this passage she describes an intersubjectivity of sound that is transmitted across generations:

I heard myself as if you
had heard me utopically
before reflection I heard
you outside only inside
sometimes only a word (96)

Her intricate syntactical shiftings bring out the issue of the difficulty of finding a boundary between the objectivity and subjectivity of sound, as well as the metaphorics of listening to the sound of a voice. The act
of listening is curiously locationless or “utopic” (a recent neologism derived from “utopian” that appears to have emerged in the last few years to sidestep the pejorative associations of “utopian”), and she also hears in Stevens the belief that poetry can point to a utopian condition. In her treatment though a note of skepticism remains. “Sometimes,” she implies, the result is “only a word.” Sound in Stevens we might say, by way of a conclusion to these questions about what it means to him, is “utopic” in all senses of that word, with all the insights, risks, and failings that are inherent in such a belief.

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Notes

1 Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 330. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with the page number only in parentheses.
2 I am interpreting rhyming in the broad sense used by Robert Duncan and other contemporary poets to include phonological and other features of poetry, including images, that rely on echoing similitudes.
3 The concept of the “logical space of reasons” was proposed by Wilfrid Sellars and now enjoys wide recognition by contemporary philosophers.
4 My attention was drawn to Empson’s interest in such tensions of high and low art by an essay by Drew Milne, “The Art of Wit and the Cambridge Science Park” (172).

Works Cited


Weather, Sound Technology, and Space in Wallace Stevens

SAM HALLIDAY

INTRODUCTION

IN AN ASSESSMENT OF contemporary culture from 1942, Wallace Stevens characterized the radio as follows:

It is not only that there are more of us and that we are actually close together. We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us.1

On the face of things, this looks like a fairly standard patrician complaint, both against the radio and the “mass” culture it sustains. But was Stevens really as hostile to this and other sound technologies, such as the telephone and phonograph, as this assessment indicates? By looking at the relation between sound technologies and space in Stevens’ poetry, we will see that he takes a more nuanced view. To be sure, sound technologies have often been seen as negating space, at least as a constraint on social interaction: Stevens’ complaint about the loss of “distance” indeed exemplifies this tendency. But there are other, less familiar ways in which sound technologies may serve to delineate space, either for instrumental or aesthetic purposes. Likewise, in Stevens’ poetry, sound technologies appear, sometimes in oblique and understated ways, as things that heighten spatial consciousness, while sound itself is valued partly for its space-delineating character. This is particularly apparent in relation to the weather, one of Stevens’ abiding concerns and a phenomenon whose scientific study turns out to coincide with that of sound on at least one historic occasion. As we shall see, one context around which the constellation of issues represented by sound technology and space in Stevens’ poetry converge is a particular meteorological phenomenon, the typhoon.

To see this, it will be necessary to assess Stevens’ relation to the wider cultures of sound now increasingly seen as an important feature of early twentieth-century culture. Recent years have seen much scholarly concern with this and a concomitant insistence on the distinctiveness of “mod-
ern” sound (see e.g. Kahn, Sterne, and Thompson, all discussed below). Sometimes, this distinction is attributed to scientific change, at others, to technological developments, and at others still, to the commodification of sound culture (at times, of course, it is all these things at once). A writer as self-consciously attuned to sound as Stevens might seem to bear some obvious relation to all this. Yet in practice, this relation can be hard to trace, despite—or perhaps because of—instances such as the above, where Stevens tackles such developments explicitly. If Stevens made his feelings about the social consequences of radio clear on this occasion, there are plenty of others in which he inscribes the phenomenological effects of such technologies indirectly—without the pejorative evaluation implicit in his 1942 comments. If such phenomenological effects are still not always easy to correlate with scholarly accounts of modern sound, this may be no bad thing if it helps point out lacunae in such accounts that Stevens’ poetry might then help fill in.

**Sound, Space, and Modernity**

To clear the decks for an engagement between Stevens and recent scholarship on modern sound, it is well to start with Stevens’ approach to sound itself. From *Harmonium* (1923) onwards, one of sound’s key roles is to highlight spatial specificity. Whether in the form of music filling a room, or of natural sounds helping to peg experience to a certain geographical location, sound provides those listening with geo-physical orientation. Take, for example, “The Snow Man,” in which “the sound of a few leaves . . . is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind / That is blowing in the same bare place” (8; my emphasis). Similarly, in “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,” “The mandoline is the instrument / Of a place” (41). In both examples, hearing a certain sound helps establish some kind of epistemological purchase on the space that sound resounds in: one “knows” a place by hearing it.2 Spaces impart their character to sounds appearing in them; correlatively, sounds serve to delineate those spaces.3

Yet sound is also fugitive and “passing,” and as such, is associated by Stevens with spatial extension and mobility (Connor 17). In “Six Significant Landscapes,” he writes, “I reach to the shore of the sea / With my ear” (59). Here, sound’s dispersive quality does not so much root attention to the spot (as in “The Snow Man”) as send it out toward the sea from which sound emanates. A later poem, “Farewell to Florida” (1936), makes the same point rather differently. Here, the wind resounding in the speaker’s “North” is imagined as arriving in another’s “South” (97). Though the two regions are clearly contrasted—the latter is characterized by “vivid blooms,” the former by “wintry slime”—the “whistl[ing]” of the wind in each acts as a common denominator between them (97–98). Whereas “The Snow Man” uses the sound of wind to suggest something like the special “genius” of place, “Farewell to Florida” uses it to think about spatial trans-locality—the way one passes through space as one proceeds from one location to another.
One way of theorizing the relation between these two ideas is suggested by Anthony Giddens’ distinction between “space” and “place.” In his account, “place” is equivalent to “locale,” a determinate and fixed geographical location (18). “Space,” on the other hand, is “empty,” and defined primarily by abstract coordinates: any part of space can thus in principle be substituted for any other (18). In pre-modern societies, Giddens argues, space and place tend to coincide, as social relations are circumscribed by relatively self-enclosed communities. However, conditions of modernity—characterized here, as in most such accounts, by industry, the rise of capitalism, the liberalization of intellectual exchange, and so on—increasingly tears place away from space, thus “fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction” (18). Like space and time (whose own uncoupling, Giddens argues, facilitates the severing of space from place as such), place and space may now float free, or be “recombin[ed]” in novel ways (19).

It is into this picture that we may fit sound technologies of the kind emerging since the late nineteenth century. From the telephone onwards (and like the electric telegraph before them), these were often hailed as neutralizing space as a constraint on social action, precisely by facilitating those non-“face-to-face” interactions Giddens describes. Although there are problems with this view, it is undeniable that such inventions uncouple at least some forms of social interaction from any dependence on one fixed “place.” The telephone furnishes a good example. What a telephone conversation is, in fact, might best be thought of as a coupling of (at least) two different places, a coupling dependent on the prior un-coupling of place from space.

How, then, might Stevens relate to all of this? As we have seen, his 1942 pronouncement on the radio centers on the medium’s negative effects on “distance,” a claim we may now read as congruent (though in a different key) with Giddens’ account of how ‘‘absent’ others” feature within modern social interactions. Interestingly, Stevens’ thinking here suggests a reciprocity between senders and receivers not normally associated with radio transmissions, at least not in the context of commercial broadcasting, which Stevens seems to have in mind. In this respect, the thought that those in Cairo may be as “intimate with us” as “we” (as auditors) are intimate with them appears distinctly odd, a fantasy against the grain of those social relations the medium actually establishes. Although this experience is here cast in a negative light for Stevens, it appears above all to represent an invasion of privacy; it might also be linked to more positive effects, such as solidarity or consolation.

Consider the opening section of “A Thought Revolved,” titled “The Mechanical Optimist”:

A lady dying of diabetes
Listened to the radio,
Catching the lesser dithyrambs.  
So heaven collects its bleating lambs. (171)

Although the governing idea here is that “heaven” is analogous to the lady—receiving souls as she perceives transmissions—the wider implication seems to be that listening to radio is like heaven, a form of auditory beatitude. The likening of “bleating lambs” to “dithyrambs” suggests a neediness on the latter’s part to be heard (or, in the poem’s terms, “caught”). Radio listening, then, is rather like praying, an experience with an implicitly responsive or reflexive structure. To this extent, the dying lady can “rejoice” (as Stevens puts it with the section’s final words), secure in the belief, illusory or not, that heaven awaits.

At this point, it becomes clear that the dialectic of space and place, in Giddens’ terms, might relate to what the lady listens to. As the second stanza indicates via the “melodic swirls” made by the lady’s arms, by way of mimicry of what she hears, this, as well as dithyrambic verse, is music. The third stanza adds that as she listened, “The idea of the Alps grew large” (171), as if by echo of the music’s vigor or sublimity. If ideas about the Alps can be detached from their referent, this suggests that music might be their agent of abstraction, sending the mind through space while the body remains relatively fixed in place.

A later poem, “The Sick Man,” recapitulates this theme. Here, “Bands of black men seem to be drifting in the air,” playing “mouth-organs” and “guitars,” while a different music altogether (“chorals,” rather than blues) sounds closer to the auditor (455). Racially, as well as geographically, the former sounds are identified as “In the South,” while the latter are associated with the “North”—an echo of the trans-regional effects of wind imagined in “Farewell to Florida.” Whereas the earlier poem sees sound as passing out of one place as it passes into another, “The Sick Man” ventures the more radical idea that sounds from these disparate origins may actually fuse, within some shared, if imaginary, space. Thus, the auditor “Waits for the unison of the music,” in which “these two will come together” (455). The question then becomes one of what role, if any, technology plays in this. For despite the poem’s thematic similarities to “The Mechanical Optimist,” no radio, or any other such device, is mentioned. To see the poem as “radio-phonic,” then, as I suggest we should, means seeing the phenomenological effects of radio (as I put it earlier) as having come detached from the device that, historically speaking, makes them possible.

This is what Stevens is also doing in another set of poems, this time with the telephone. Witness Emily Thompson’s analysis of how the latter technology alters the “traditional” relation between sound and space:

When two people converse face-to-face, the sound is modified as it passes from speaker to listener. This modification is the
result not only of the distance between them (which affects the volume or loudness of sound), but also by the acoustical character of the space that they inhabit (which affects the quality of sound). Little such spatial modification occurred when people began to converse over the telephone. In order for a telephone conversation to be audible, the transmitter had to be held close to the speaker’s mouth and the receiver adjacent to the listener’s ear; thus telephonic sounds did not fully occupy architectural space as did the sounds of an ordinary conversation. It was as if the telephonic conversants were speaking directly and intimately into each other’s ears, oblivious to not only the distance between them, but also the space around them. (235)

The supreme negotiation of such effects in Stevens’ poetry appears in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor.” Here, Stevens writes, “the sound / Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice / That is my own voice speaking in my ear” (265)—virtually an abstract of the telephone’s effects, as Thompson describes them. In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” similarly, the touch of hands is likened to “a voice that, speaking without form, / Gritting the ear, whispers humane repose” (413). Though the first example differs from telephony in placing the speaker on both sides of the conversation, as it were, both examples echo the telephone’s uncoupling of voices from “face-to-face”-ness (as both Thompson and Giddens call it), or what Steven Connor calls “frontality” (5). The earlier poem’s opening lines even echo Giddens’ sense of how modern social relations draw one out of one fixed “place”: “To speak quietly at such a distance, to speak / And to be heard is to be large in space” (263). This, then, is how distance may be transcended with respect to social interaction—exactly as in Stevens’ 1942 commentary on radio—even as it is affirmed as a geo-physical reality.

STEVE N AND SOUN D STUDIES

For this very reason, though, it will not do to claim that Stevens’ commentaries on sound simply confirm the findings of cultural historians or social scientists. The lines from “Chocorua to Its Neighbor” just quoted may even be said to do the opposite, parting company with Thompson’s claim that space is not an audible feature of telephony. The next two lines of the poem go further, declaring that being “large in space” means being “part / Of sky, of sea, large earth, large air” (263): hearing in space, then, may mean also being part of space itself. This identification of the self with space furthermore complicates Giddens’ distinction between space and place, suggesting that when one is heard speaking over distance, the former is just as “full” and sensuous as the latter. The very “filled-ness” of space in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor” and other poems, then, militates against any attempt to see space as irrelevant to the propagation of sound, as in Thompson’s account of early telephony, or Stevens’ own 1942 com-
mentary on radio. What, then, of what Stevens elsewhere calls “The desire to be at the end of distances” (446) and the relationship this may have with sound technologies? Clearly, this can no longer be seen as a matter of simply being “oblivious” to space, as Thompson might have it. Instead, it must be seen as a desire for distance to be removed (or at least minimized) as a constraint on sensation and installed precisely as an object to be sensed.

To explore this matter further, it will help to have a better idea of what contemporary scholars have to say more generally about the emergence and character of “modern” sound. For Thompson, the advent of the telephone is part of a wider “reformulation of the relationship between sound and space,” proceeding throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which the two were steadily dissociated “until the relationship ceased to exist” (2). This is identified as part of a still wider trend—similar, in fact, to that identified by Giddens—whereby modernity destroys “traditional space-time relationships” (172). However, the point here is not so much that space, time, and sound henceforth have nothing to do with one another, as that the three can now be recombined in different ways (again, this echoes Giddens) (187). Thus, developments in acoustic engineering and accompanying science (Thompson’s focal interests) meant that by the 1930s, “Any size or type of space could . . . possess any type of sound” (187). From concert halls to the fictitious spaces depicted in sound film, the development of sound-effect technology meant that “[t]he sound of space was now a quality that could be added electrically” (7).

The prerequisite for this, of course, was the development of sound reproduction technologies capable of simulating the effects of different spaces. These in turn were based on the transducer, which Jonathan Sterne has identified as the device or principle behind all sound reproduction. A transducer is any agency that turns “sound into something else”—electricity, say, in telephony—“and that something else back into sound” (22). An early application is the phonograph, which, like its competitor and eventual successor, the gramophone, reproduced sound by first inscribing it on discs or rolls of wax or tin. In the view of both Douglas Kahn and Friedrich Kittler, the phonograph is seminal for modern sound, not least because of the indiscriminate way it records whatever comes within its range. As Kittler writes, it “does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; it registers acoustic events as such” (23). The result, in Kahn’s view, is “all sound” (9), a new aesthetic and experiential category, representing a radically equalized sonic field in which no form or source of sound is privileged over any other. In modernism, and modernity more generally, the development of this category thus “entailed more sounds and produced a greater emphasis on listening to things, to different things, and to more of them and on listening differently” (Kahn 9).
At first sight, it is quite easy to see how Stevens’ work might be fitted into this picture. His general attentiveness to sound may be read as compatible with Kahn’s suggestions about “all sound” and its corresponding perceptual paradigm. This view is strengthened by what we have seen to be Stevens’ liberal treatment of a wide range of sounds and his fondness for running different sounds together. In “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” to quote another example, “The cricket in the telephone is still[ed]” (255), thus emblematically conflating the natural with the technological and the relatively loud with the quiet or silent. From this perspective, we might even see Stevens’ entire oeuvre as “phonographic,” much as Tim Armstrong has seen other texts of the period, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (*Modernism* 110). Yet, the oblique angle one must follow in connecting most of Stevens’ poetry with those social contexts typically identified with modernity—to recall Giddens’ list of characteristics that include industry, the rise of capitalism, and liberalized intellectual exchange—militates against too close an identification of his work with the topical concerns of most recent sound-related scholarship. Put simply, his work is just too pastoral, too centered on the natural world, to seem completely explicable in terms of these historical determinates.

One way of explaining this, of course, would be to make the obvious point that modernity has never, in fact, been quite as self-identical or homogeneous as modernization narratives typically imply. To adapt a phrase from Bruno Latour, “we have never been (entirely) modern”—not in the sense that modernization does not occur at all, but that it is always uneven and necessarily imbricated in the premodern and historically a-specific.9 Another way would be to say that Stevens was in fact historically precocious in his attentiveness to just those sounds imperiled by those historic trends most modernization narratives consider: the sound of leaves, say, as they are obscured by machine noise, or the sounds of birds, as drowned out by urban din. It would be possible, in this respect (though I will not pursue this line of argument here), to correlate Stevens’ work with that of R. Murray Schafer—perhaps not coincidentally, a source for Thompson—and others who, since the late 1960s, have argued on ecological grounds for the “notation” (and thus, ultimately, conservation) of sounds occurring across the range of natural environments.10

A third way, however, happily lies through the work of Thompson and those like her, and it is this that we shall follow to our conclusion. In a series of developments that she and other scholars have sometimes spotted without always joining together, sound technologies were used to plot, as much as conquer space, and thus describe, as well as outstrip “distances.” The telephone itself was imagined by its inventor, Alexander Graham Bell, in this connection. In a speech of 1914, he describes how the device might be used to pick up the sound of explosives detonated under the ocean, thus helping to establish (once the speed of sound was accounted for) the dimensions of sub-aquatic space (651). Though this suggestion was not
picked up on immediately, the First World War, beginning in the same year, saw parallel developments, with some acoustic engineers inventing underwater sound detectors for locating enemy submarines and others developing “‘Sound ranging’” techniques, whereby microphones were used to measure the sound intensity (and thus distance) of enemy artillery (Thompson 88–89). World War Two accelerated such developments and saw the full-scale deployment of both sonar and radar, the first of which enhanced the capacity to locate objects underwater and the second of which extended this capacity to objects flying through the air (see Devereux). In all these instances, sound technologies were used less as means of communication—though they were also this as well—than as epistemological tools able to access forms or objects of knowledge inaccessible by other means.

If all this seems marginal to the thematic preoccupations of Stevens’ poetry, it does at least suggest a general context in which his desire for distance “to be sensed” (as I have put it) might be located. A more direct relation, though, might be discovered between his poetry and acoustic science of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, the principle behind all sound reproduction—defined by Jonathan Sterne, as we recall, as the turning of sound into something else and that something else back into sound—was prefigured by earlier investigations into the ontology of sound itself. In the work of John Tyndall, for example, one of the most widely read of all Victorian scientists, sound is repeatedly related to, modified by, and even transformed into visible phenomena via such materials as solids, gas, and flame. The philosophical burden of such demonstrations is to show that sound is fundamentally akin to other physical phenomena, such as light and heat, and thus that all these are species of vibration, borne by waves. In Stevens’ oeuvre, similarly, sound is repeatedly translated into and out of other forms, both material and sensory. Take this stanza from “Variations on a Summer Day”:

A music more than a breath, but less
Than the wind, sub-music like sub-speech,
A repetition of unconscious things,
Letters of rock and water, words
Of the visible elements, and of ours. (212)

Just as sound passes into and out of audibility (“sub-music” and “sub-speech”), so it passes in some fundamental (if here relatively obscure) way into those more tangible objects, “rock and water.” These objects’ own discursive trans-substantiation (“Letters,” “words”), meanwhile, seems to mediate sound’s own translation into another sensory register, vision, in the stanza’s closing line.

But it is music, and its relationship to the natural sounds of wind and water, that seems uppermost in Stevens’ mind here. As Kahn writes,
“nearly all attributes of music at one time or another have been ascribed to figures and forms of water,” a fact reflected in the “long-standing association of water and sound in observational acoustics” (246). As a correlative of the first of these two trends, we might cite Stevens’ “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” where “the night conceives the sea-sounds in silence, / And out of their droning sibilants makes / A serenade” (69). As a correlative to the second trend, we might invoke the astonishing suggestion elsewhere in “Variations on a Summer Day” that “one looks at the sea / As one improvises, on the piano” (213). In an early, uncollected poem, Stevens makes what might almost be a direct reference to acoustic science. In the 1870s, Tyndall made a series of studies of how weather conditions impede the sound of foghorns and other sound signals used on rivers and around ports. “The real enemy to the transmission of sound,” he concludes in his article “On Transmission of Sound by the Atmosphere,” is “not rain, nor hail, nor haze,” as many think, “but water in a vaporous form mingled with the air so as to render it acoustically turbid and flocculent” (15). Compare Stevens:

Fog, now, and a bell,
A smooth, a rolling tide.
Drone, bell, drone and tell,
Bell, what vapors hide. (502)

Evidently, the “bell” helps navigate space sonically, once “Fog” has made it visibly obscure. Although sound is here deployed against invisibility, Stevens knows, as Tyndall knew before him, that on a more basic level air represents the medium through which both auditory and visible phenomena both must pass.

**CONCLUSION: THE TECHNOLOGY OF WEATHER**

The marriage of air and water in this poem, via “vapor,” thus leads to that most abiding topic in Stevens’ work: the weather. As we have seen, the sound of wind is one meteorological phenomenon among many that Stevens uses to establish geo-physical coordinates, whether in terms of local “place” or abstract “space.” But what exactly is it about weather that makes it so inexhaustibly fascinating as a subject matter for poetry? In his notebooks, Stevens writes: “Weather is a sense of nature. Poetry is a sense” (902). Taking the recurrence of the word “sense” in both of these sentences seriously, one might therefore say that poetry is itself a kind of weather forecasting, an opening of oneself up to the finest discriminations and most accurate perceptions of one’s environment. To explore the implications of this idea more fully, we might finally consider the actual history of weather forecasting in the United States.

The first (and still existing) national weather forecasting agency, the United States Weather Bureau, was established 1870, using the electric telegraph
to gather weather reports from observation points across the country (see Whitnah). Collation of these reports allowed conditions across the continent to be compared, thus allowing national forecasts to be made on the basis of local trends and deviations. Subsequent decades saw the telegraph supplemented by newer technologies, including those sound technologies, the telephone and radio, we have focused on throughout this article. A popularizing history of the weather bureau published in 1922 celebrated such developments; its account of how radio, especially, expands the scope of weather forecasting deserves to be quoted at some length:

Since the development of radio telegraphy it has been possible to supplement the telegraphic reports from mainland stations with reports made on distant islands in the north Pacific and in the West Indies and on ships at sea. By an arrangement made with steamship companies, meteorological observations are made on upward of one hundred vessels navigating the coastal waters of the middle and southern Atlantic states, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean sea, and the Pacific Coast, and transmitted by wireless to shore stations, and thence to the central office of the Weather Bureau. (Weber 17–18)

As well as making clear the importance of wireless technology to weather forecasting, this represents a virtual survey of the topography of Stevens’ poetry: the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea especially, whose climactic signatures are so conspicuous a feature of his writing, stand out as objects (or regions) to be “sensed.” The further function of this technology, meanwhile, is to make the forecasts based on remotely sensed intelligence available across the regions they survey. The 1922 history continues:

The morning forecasts are given to the evening papers, and are telegraphed to about 1600 principal points for further dissemination by telegraph, telephone, wireless, and postal service. They are displayed by means of temperature and weather flags and printed on weather maps, bulletins and cards posted in public places throughout the United States, especially in post offices, hotels, stores, corridors and elevators of office buildings, railway stations, etc. (Weber 20)

A whole ecology of media—including newspapers and flags as well as sound technologies—thus ensured that by the time Stevens published his first book of poetry, just one year after this was written, the weather in all parts of the United States could be known to anyone in any one part, at any moment.

Is this the sort of weather Stevens has in mind, either in his notebook entry or elsewhere? I know of no evidence that he took a particular inter-
est in the media or technological infrastructure of long-distance weather forecasting, and nowhere where he refers to it specifically. Clearly, in one respect, moreover, his whole emphasis is very different: in “The Snow Man,” and many other instances, the focus is rather on local conditions, immediately perceptible to the observer, and certainly perceptible without any technological mediation. Yet in another sense, this weather is, perhaps, an emblem or synecdoche of the trans- or supra-local phenomena that dominate his work, especially the later poetry. In “The News and the Weather”—a significant title, surely—“The blue sun in his red cockade” is imagined “Walk[ing] the United States today.” Standing “Taller than any eye can see” (237), this sun represents precisely the transcendent, suprasensory vantage point weather forecasting offers (or which, alternatively, the weather forecast constructs). In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” the “horizons of perception” are extended to include both cosmological and local space, “a perspective” in which “Men are part both in the inch and in the mile” (432). In “The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract,” Stevens even associates such perspectives with a specific piece of (non-transmitting) meteorological apparatus, imaging an “an intellect in which we are fleet: present / Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole / Of communication” (370).12

This ubiquity in space, meanwhile, represents an epistemological correlative to those sociological and technological developments we have seen as characterizing modernity. In “A Collect of Philosophy,” Stevens quotes the philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead’s statement that his own theory “involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world'” (858; cf. Steinman 160). As well as uncannily evoking Giddens—for whom the uncoupling of space from place is prerequisite for social relations with “locationally distant” others—this echoes Thompson’s claim that sound technologies represent the uncoupling of time from space and the uncoupling of both from sound. Weather forecasting, in this respect, is both congruent with and contrary to Whitehead’s statement: congruent, where such technologies entail the radical interpenetration of hitherto “simple location[s]”; contrary, because despite this, each forecast necessarily depends on local observation.

For a final demonstration of how weather and technology relate, both to each other and to sound, we may turn to another significantly titled Stevens poem, “The Search for Sound Free from Motion.” This begins:

All afternoon the gramaphone
Parl-parled the West-Indian weather.
The zebra leaves, the sea
And it all spoke together. (240)
As in “The Mechanical Optimist,” technology is a source of music, whose “Parl-parl[ing]” can here be seen either as complementary to the weather, or as competitive, one being started to drown the other out. The poem’s title is interestingly equivocal, both in this respect and in its commentary on sound itself: in one important sense, the sound of weather is the sound of motion, being inextricable from (and indeed, indexical of) the world’s essential turbulence. Yet, the “gramaphone,” as Stevens spells it, does not obviously represent a clear alternative in this respect, for not only does its own “Parl-parl[ing]” perhaps represent the stutter of an all-too-mobile needle on a damaged record, but also it itself embodies motion via its turnable’s revolutions.

Any opposition between technology and weather is effectively dissolved in the poem’s third stanza, where both collapse into a hybrid figure, the “gramaphoon” (240; cf. Armstrong, “Player Piano”). Here, we see the ultimate convergence of weather, technology, and sound onto a shared experiential and conceptual space. In the superb opening sequences of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s near-contemporaneous film, A Matter of Life and Death (1946), a World War Two bomber is depicted flying through a cloud-thronged, weather-heavy space, while its pilot radios to base with what he takes to be his dying words. Here, the sounds of radio and the weather are shown as having some fundamental parity, helping to delineate and “fill” a space that is both physical and mental. Likewise, in Stevens’ poem, the “gramaphoon” is clearly both a discrete weather phenomenon—the typhoon—and a machine: simultaneously meteorological and technological; musical and non-musical; “natural” and “cultural.” As such, it is another suitable analogue for Kahn’s and Kittler’s view of what the gramaphone and phonograph achieve: the revelation, if not construction, of “all sound.”

We began with Stevens’ remark about the radio’s negative effects on “distance.” Now, we have seen poems where distance is savored and caressed, and the apparently opposed perspectives of locality and abstract space reconciled. It is no accident that weather should feature so prominently in such poetry, or that sound should be connected to it. Indeed, one implication of Tyndall’s work is that sound is a kind of weather, being one among many wave-forms such as those of air and water. But neither is it an accident that sound technologies should feature in this poetry, both explicitly and indirectly, for while they may bridge space, we have seen that they are not necessarily opposed to it. One reason why Stevens may have thought about weather via sound, indeed (as opposed, or in addition, to, say, vision), is that sound technologies combine the local and trans-local in much the same way as weather does itself: a telephone conversation, say, being as binding of different locations as the wind that blows from north to south in “Farewell to Florida,” or the trans-generic music linking north and south in “The Sick Man.” If “There is no” social “distance” as the result of radio and such technologies (as Stevens claimed in 1942),
the conflation of gramophone and typhoon in “The Search for Sound Free from Motion” suggests some kind of aesthetic compensation: sonorities detached from social, or even semantic, determination; a poetically created world of sound itself.

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Notes

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1Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 653. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with the page number(s) only in parentheses.

2Cf. Henri Lefebvre: “Space is listened for, in fact, as much as seen, and heard before it comes into view” (199–200).

3The same point is made via another sense, vision, at the conclusion of “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,” where a woman’s dress is characterized as “an invisible element of that place / Made visible” (41). For more on sound as space defining, see Peg Rawes’s “Sonic Envelopes.”

4For a contemporary rehearsal of this view, see Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives*.

5See my *Science and Technology in the Age of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain and James*, where I argue that such technologies may intensify consciousness of spatial dislocation, despite rendering this apparently obsolescent.

6Although early radio was a relatively reciprocal medium, it had, by the mid-1920s, settled into a commercial format where senders and receivers (or producers and consumers) were clearly differentiated. See Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922*, and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934*.

7One should note though that another agency, “The words of winter” (455), is identified as the unifying medium here.

8Cf. the preceding line in “The Rock” just quoted, where Stevens imagines “New senses in the engenderings of sense” (446).

9See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. This is not, however, what Latour means by the phrase himself. His concern is rather with modern epistemology and the problems he considers this as causing for moderns’ self-understanding.


12The term “cloud-pole” (or “cloud pole”) was sometimes used in this period to designate a mobile lightning conductor designed to attract lightning strikes for scientific purposes (see B. F. J. Schonland, “The Interchange of Electricity between Thunder-clouds and the Earth” [252–62]). I am grateful to Richard Hamblyn for this reference and information.
Works Cited


Wallace Stevens and the Spoken Word

TYLER HOFFMAN

I

THAT WALLACE STEVENS “rolls the vocables” in his poetry (as Theodore Roethke puts it in his lyric “A Rouse for Stevens” [258]), paying great attention to the sonority of his syllables, is well known. In light of such mellifluence, one might wonder how Stevens performed his poetry, and how his view of language and its auditory effects impacted his view of verse recitation and his own delivery style. This essay examines Stevens’ ambivalent attitudes about the oral performance of poetry in light of modernist practice (and the histories leading up to it), and seeks to give some sense of Stevens’ interpretation of his poetry through his activity of reading it aloud.

In a New York Times review of the expanded edition of Harmonium (August 9, 1931), Percy Hutchinson notes that the book “cannot endure” because it is “pure poetry,” without a grounding in any “idea that can vitally affect the mind” (“to be effective and lasting, poetry must be based on life, it must touch and vitalize emotion’); he concludes that it is a “‘stunt,’ ” “a glittering edifice of icicles,” a volume “Brilliant as the moon,” but “equally dead.” He further observes, “For the full tonal and rhythmic effect of [‘Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores’] it must be read aloud, chanted, as Tennyson and Swinburne chanted their verses.” The orotund quality of the language, Hutchinson feels, amounts to a “musical attainment,” but one of dubious distinction (88–90). In his review of Stevens’ Transport to Summer (1947), Robert Lowell similarly remarks on the excessively incantatory cadences of his poems, finding that “their rhetoric, with its Tennysonian sound effects, its harmonious alliteration, and its exotic vocabulary, is sometimes no more than an enchanting inflection of the voice” (286). These cautions about the intoning of poetry on the page—one that can lead to or betray a certain semantic emptiness—must be put into context; for now, it is enough to note the musical style found to be shaping Stevens’ vocal inscriptions and the perceived dangers of it.

Despite the New York Times reviewer’s insistence that one of the poems must be read out loud in order for its full resonance to be realized, Stevens was not a fan of the recitation of poetry. In a letter in which he refused to read at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, Stevens made known his
repugnance at the spoken word: “I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly” (qtd. in Richardson 225). To Karl Shapiro, who had invited Stevens to give a poetry reading in Chicago, he writes, “I have never gone around the country reading poetry and have no intention of doing so” (June 5, 1951) (L 718). Stevens believed that there was something essentially vulgar about poetry recital; declining an invitation to read at Columbia University (December 23, 1941), he asserts, “I am afraid I don’t like the idea. Poets, like millionaires, should be neither seen nor heard. Anyhow, I don’t like public appearances except in print” (qtd. in Brazeau 306). In a September 1943 letter to May Sarton (declining yet another invitation to read, this time as part of a wartime poetry series she had organized at the New York Public Library), Stevens blamed his shyness and bad nerves: “I suffer like a child with something ‘coming on’ as the time for such a thing approaches”; he concludes, “It isn’t worth reading in public unless one reads as one reads to oneself, and I can’t imagine doing that” (qtd. in Brazeau 162). It is noteworthy that Stevens did submit on several occasions to read his poetry in public, agreeing to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa poem to Harvard graduates in 1945 and reading at a few venues in the 1950s.

Stevens refused repeated efforts to get him to record his poems, too, using as an excuse his feeling that he did not read his work well. He turned down offers from a string of Poetry Consultants to the Library of Congress, including Robert Penn Warren (March 1945), Karl Shapiro (1946), Allen Tate (February 1947), and Robert Lowell (April 1948). To Tate, he explained most fully his wariness of the apparatus of the tape recorder:

Mr. Shapiro [then Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress] wrote to me only the other day. I refused to do this up in Cambridge. This is probably because I am voice shy. But I had previously refused to do it for Mr. Warren and also for someone at Columbia. Several years ago they put in a dictaphone system here at the office. In using this system you dictated your letters down a pipe, so to speak, and when you turned the machine so that it read back what you had dictated it sounded very much like a leak somewhere in the house in the middle of the night. Of course, you will say that NBC will fix that all up and I won’t be able to tell myself from Frank Sinatra, but you are going to have a tough time talking me into it. And, besides, my contract with Knopf makes it necessary for me to procure his permission. You could leave a blank space at the end of it and say that Mr. Stevens has just completed reading Sunday Morning in deaf and dumb. (Qtd. in Richardson 283)

Stevens’ sense, based on his experience as an executive in the insurance industry, that a certain mechanical hollowness stamps the recorded
voice encourages him to stay away from sound recording devices, which he sees as having a self-alienating effect (“I won’t be able to tell myself from Frank Sinatra”). He appears concerned not only about the quality of any recording of poetry, but also about the idea of bringing poetry in line with workaday business practice and thus causing it to suffer its homogenizing effects.

Despite his reluctance, tape recordings do exist of Stevens performing his poetry. Introduced by Richard Wilbur at a reading at Harvard on May 1, 1952, Stevens writes in retrospect of that event that “apparently someone in the audience took a tape although I was not conscious of it at the time. After it was all over and after the audience had dispersed, someone asked me whether the taking of the tape had bothered me. As I say, I did not even know that it was being taken” (L 750–51). In another letter, he reports that he read “in Cambridge a few weeks ago (at what I intend to be the last public reading I shall ever give—I dislike that sort of thing)” (L 752–53). This language was not unusual: Stevens bristled at the very idea of public poetry recital, often casting his latest performance as his last. (He was at Harvard again, in 1954, reading from his poetry and is on record doing so.) In a letter dated January 7, 1953, he expresses his discomfort with poetry readings and what he regards as their unnaturalness, even as he recognizes the growing interest in the spoken word as emergent technologies take hold:

I have always declined to make records. Some time ago I read at Harvard and I was told afterwards that without my knowledge a complete tape had been taken. This was not taken by the College, which would naturally ask my consent. While I don’t know who took it, I think I could make a guess. I have always disliked the idea of records. And yet on the one occasion that I visited the Poetry Room in the new library at Cambridge there were a half dozen people sitting around with tubes in their ears taking it all in the most natural way in the world. (L 765–66)

In the same letter he reiterates his distance from the arena of public performance: “I don’t care to go around the country the way some poets do reading the same thing night after night. It is a waste of time and money unless one makes a business of it.” Stevens takes special note of Carl Sandburg, who, he says, “used to come here with a pocketful of checks, each of them for, say, $200.00 or $300.00. He used to arrange an itinerary. He read in Hartford in the afternoon, in New Britain in the evening, and Meriden the next day, and so on”; he concludes: “He did it and enjoyed it and made a lot of money. But I could not do such a thing. I am not critical of those who are able to do it. It is merely that I don’t care to do it and therefore am not able to do it” (L 766).
Not only did Stevens have Sandburg in mind when he was casting his own relation to the public enactment of poetry; he also clearly was haunted by the popular figure of Vachel Lindsay, whose theory of poetry as "the Higher Vaudeville" was meant to woo "the tired business man" with a loud, jazzy performance style replete with recital cues in the margins of his printed verse (Poetry 860–61). (Ironically, critics frequently asserted that Lindsay’s poetry too had to be read aloud to be appreciated fully.) Stevens grimaced at the news of Lindsay’s public appearances and expressed particular distaste at the idea of Lindsay’s signing his name in books for sale at his recitals: "Lindsay comes [to Hartford, Conn.] next week with other early songsters. Autograph copies of his poems are to be sold in the lobby of the High School. My word!" (L 226). Such signs of presence, Stevens felt, cheapened poetry by turning it into a commodity and turning the poet into a celebrity in the cultural economy. (It is interesting, though, that Stevens, in a letter to his publisher, refers to having autographed copies of his own most recent book after reading from it at the Poetry Center just a year before his death.)

If we turn to consider the example of Lindsay more fully, as well as the prescriptions of T. S. Eliot, we can see better how Stevens’ view of poetry performance—and of the social role of the poet from which it descends—diverges from that of his fellow modernists. Lindsay’s construction of a mass audience through oral performance rested on a politics of primitivism central to modernist literary doctrine and related directly to his communitarian ideal. At a 1914 dinner sponsored by Poetry magazine in honor of W. B. Yeats, Lindsay recited to thunderous applause, and Yeats, who was in attendance, responded enthusiastically, observing that in American vaudeville and Lindsay’s performance pieces the “primitive singing of poetry” (Congo vi) still survived. In her preface to Lindsay’s 1914 book The Congo and Other Poems, Harriet Monroe, editor of Poetry, similarly focused on the primitivist strain running through Lindsay’s public poetry, drawing on F. T. Marinetti’s article “Futurism and the Theatre,” where “he urges the revolutionary value of ‘American eccentrics,’ citing the fundamental primitive quality of their vaudeville art”; she notes “Mr. Lindsay’s plea for a closer relation between the poet and his audience, for a return to the healthier open-air conditions, and immediate personal contacts, in the art of the Greeks and of primitive nations. Such conditions and contacts may still be found, if the world only knew it, in the wonderful song-dances of the Hopis and others of our aboriginal tribes. They may be found, also, in a measure, in the quick response between artist and audience in modern vaudeville” (Congo viii–ix).

This “return to primitive sympathies between artist and audience” corresponds with Eliot’s sense that audience participation represents a vital element in popular commercial entertainment: “The working man who went to the music-hall . . . and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act. . . . [H]e was engaged in that collaboration of the au-
dience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art” (“Marie Lloyd” 407). Participation in such a ritual, Eliot believes, generates the communal solidarity he admires in tribal societies, for ritual allows members of the tribe to “partake in a common nature from which other men are excluded” (“Durkheim” 14). (Of course, racist and sexist elements exist as the troubling side of this othering, as they do in Lindsay’s work.) Although Eliot averred that the poet “would like to be something of a popular entertainer,” his eventual renunciation of poetry (in favor of drama) substantiates his view that that status is impossible if one is to retain distinction as an artist: “A genuine reconciliation with popular culture cannot take place on poetry’s terms, for nothing one might do with poetry in contemporary Western society seems likely to make it a truly public or popular art. A poeticized (or ‘refined’) music hall is a much likelier prospect, particularly if a music-hall audience can be brought along with it” (The Use of Poetry 154; Chinitz 240). Lindsay attempted just such a reconciliation, reimagining poetry as a popular art through presence as he worked to solidify community at a time of seismic disturbances in U.S. culture.

Of course, Lindsay’s notion of presence—of the personality of the poet—in poetry dissents from Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry—a theory set forth in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Believing that “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality,” Eliot insists on the need “To divert interest from the poet to the poetry,” concluding that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Selected Essays 7, 11, 10). Reactions to Lindsay’s powerful presence as a poet-performer verify an alternative posture: “‘As Vachel Lindsay came forward on a stage,’ one critic was to write, ‘the force of his personality brought an immediate sense of expectancy in his audience.’ Another spoke of his ‘electric presence. . . . He set the throng on fire’” (qtd. in Ruggles 237). Not surprisingly, after hearing Lindsay recite in London in 1920, Eliot said that he was “appalled” (Letters 410). Although Eliot, like Lindsay, believed in the fortifying effects of popular culture (“Fine art is the refinement, not the antithesis, of popular art”), he did not find Lindsay’s poetic performance credible, apparently deeming his “higher vaudeville” imagination not nearly high enough (“Marianne Moore” 595). Eliot’s remark that “The interest of a performer is almost certain to be centered in himself. . . . The performer is interested not in form but in opportunities for virtuosity or in the communication of his ‘personality’” points to his low opinion of a poet such as Lindsay who (at least for a time) staked his reputation on his appeal to a mass audience as opposed to committing himself to the intellectual rigors of “form” (Sacred Wood 69).

Stevens would have been alarmed at the performance directions that accompany Lindsay’s published poetry, and he expressed his displeasure
in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer with a statement that found its way into the designer’s note of the 1937 edition of his own The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems:

“In some of the lines appear unusual blank spaces *** By this experimental device the author wishes to indicate a desirable pause or emphasis suggested by the sense” etc.

... A specimen of this is the poem on page 19; the second and sixth lines of that poem contain their syllables in a relatively few words. For instance, half of the sixth line is in one word. When I read the proofs I said that I thought that the only way of avoiding a very short line was to space between the words. This ordinary solution for an ordinary difficulty becomes “an experimental device.” (L 326)

As Stevens objects, “This is pure nonsense. I never said any such thing and have a horror of poetry pretending to be contemporaneous because of typographical queerness” (L 326). The visual “queerness” of Lindsay’s performance-centered texts—his attempt to indicate accent, tone, and tempo in sidebars to the poem—struck Stevens as a trendy supplement that violated poetic decorum. Indeed, Stevens believes that he is able to record the precise vocal tune on the page in his poems, without the help of marginal instruction, and he even uses the expression “unalterable vibration” to characterize the aural resonance of which the scripted poetic word is capable.1

Ironically, though, Lindsay shared Stevens’ suspicion of the mediatized voice, and Lindsay himself would grow to be a reluctant performer, unable to bear the repetition of the same self in poetry year after year. Lindsay’s scorn for the recorded human voice and the entire grating soundscape of technologized America runs throughout his later writings. In 1929, he declares his antagonism to “megaphone, radio, talking movie, telephone, or other mechanical intruder,” and imagines himself as at war against the sonic gale unleashed by consumer capitalism, finding that there exists no voice reproduction machinery to rival in beauty the contours of the unamplified “spoken word” (Poetry 986, 987).

Despite Lindsay’s feelings about the inferior quality of audio recording, and the artistic need, therefore, to distance oneself from it, R. D. Darrell, an American music critic who was one of the first to concentrate primarily on recordings, in “Phonographic Insurance on American Art” (April 1931), states the importance of preserving a voice as key as Lindsay’s. Echoing others, Darrell finds of Lindsay’s poems that, “Fine as they are to the eye, they are only shells of themselves until they are sounded, and Mr. Lindsay’s is the only voice that can squeeze out the full richness of their musical juices”; he goes on to insist that that voice be put on record for all time:
Fortunately Mr. Lindsay has been able to reach what is probably the largest audience any modern poet had directly addressed. But he cannot recite for ever to new hordes of students as they come on; and the precise vocal tune, which can never be recorded by musical notation on paper, will inevitably be lost unless there is enough common sense alive in the land to take out insurance on some of the finest things in American art. Phonograph records of every poem in this book, exactly as Mr. Lindsay chants it, ought to be made, and be made at once.

Cabell Greet, a professor at Columbia University, had put Lindsay before the microphone in January 1931. The product of the session was “a batch of forty double-sided records embodying some thirty poems.” Greet is quoted in Lindsay’s obituary in the *New York Times* (December 6, 1931) as saying that “The auditions were made at the request of Mr. Lindsay. . . . This is the first time that I know of that records of a poet’s voice will be kept for posterity after his death.” It would seem that Lindsay’s desire to have his voice preserved was an attempt on his part to insure his future, no matter the playback quality.

When Stevens agreed to record a selection of his poems for Caedmon toward the end of his life, he again bowed to his own mortality, the insurance man taking out an insurance policy on his own poetic posterity. But what sort of voice did Stevens leave behind, what oral interpretation of his poems did he bequeath to future generations? How is his performance of his poetry shaped by theories of poetry recital through history, up to and including those in ascendance during the modernist period?

II

If we return to the Augustan era, we see that emphasis was placed on cultivating a natural, prosaic style in the recitation of verse. Isaac Watts, in *The Art of Reading and Writing English* (1721), a manual intended to teach children how to read, includes instructions in reading poetry aloud, and advocates that the reader “pronounce every Word, and every Sentence, just as if it were Prose, . . . giving each Word and Syllable its due and natural Accent” (76). Likewise, Thomas Sheridan, actor and teacher of elocution, insists that “All the words should be pronounced exactly in the same way as in prose” and, in *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, he expounds that the main idea in reciting poetry is to preserve the “tones and cadences . . . which we use in speaking” (qtd. in Perkins 662). However, the British romantic poets depart from this inherited model, as their delivery style chimes with Hegel’s sense in 1825 that poetry should be “spoken, sung, recited, represented through living persons as musical works are”: “And since *inwardness* should be the soul of the recitation, the expression of it should rely especially on the musical aspect and partly allow, partly ne-
cessitate a manifold modulation of the voice, song, instrument accompaniment, and the like.” As David Perkins finds, the romantic poets, although not always consistent in their performance modalities, “stylized the delivery of poetry, widely differentiating it from natural speech and moving it closer to music.” William Hazlitt, for instance, describes Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798 as reciting in the form of a “chant,” a far cry from the Augustan system of vocal delivery. It is interesting to note, too, that Coleridge’s poem “The Raven,” which was first published in the Morning Post that same year, includes the paratextual instruction that it “must be read in recitative” (Perkins 665, 661, 669).

In America, the elocutionist Ebenezer Porter, whose 1839 Rhetorical Reader informed Emily Dickinson’s rhetorical use of dashes of varying degree in her lyrics, advocated use of the orotund voice: “the genius of verse requires that it be pronounced with a fuller swell of the open vowels, and in a manner more melodious and flowing than prose” (qtd. in Perkins 662). Likewise, the actor James E. Murdoch maintained that poetry should not be read as one ordinarily converses, but delivered with heightened effect. James Rush in The Philosophy of the Human Voice (1827) insisted that the “orotund” voice be used for the recitation of certain types of highly expressive poetry, especially dramatic and epic, but not all. Finally, William Russell’s Orthophony, or Vocal Culture (1845), dedicated to Murdoch and founded upon Rush’s Philosophy, cautioned that meter should not “be marked [in the recitation of verse] in that overdone style of chanting excess which offends the ear,” that sound should not trump sense (131, 223). As this last remark suggests, central to the debate was how much the reciter should foreground or subdue the metrical pattern. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hiram Corson in The Voice and Spiritual Education (1896) decries vocal training as conducted by schools of elocution, which, he says, “frequently offend people of taste and culture by an extravagance of expression, by mimetic gesture, and by offensive mannerisms of various kinds.” He exalts naturalness in reading, demanding that there be no “affectation” of any kind in performance (9). Horace A. Eaton, picking up this thread in 1913 in the English Journal, similarly dismisses “elocutionary or dramatic reading” in favor of the “reading of verse without gesture, without facial contortions and vocal gymnastics, such reading as any lover of poetry might do sitting comfortably in his study chair”; as he insists, one must read verse differently than one would read prose, but also must avoid the pitfall of any “elevation of tone” that is “exaggerated” and thus “highly artificial” (151, 156).

Yeats famously married the idea that the performance of poetry should resist histrionism with the romantic emphasis on musicality in the recital of verse. In his lecture “Literature and the Living Voice” (1906), he proclaims, “The reciter cannot be a player [actor], for that is a different art; but he must be a messenger, and he should be as interesting, as exciting, as are all that carry great news” (Explorations 215). In his earlier “Speaking to
the Psaltery” (1902), which instructs on how to read lyric poetry accompanied by that stringed instrument, he relates what he refers to as a “new art, new in modern life, I mean,” an art whose effects are at variance with “the gross effects” of “[m]odern acting and recitation” and that “will have to train its hearers as well as its speakers, for it takes time to surrender gladly the gross effects one is accustomed to, and one may well find mere monotony at first where one soon learns to find a variety as incalculable as in the outline of faces or in the expression of eyes” (Essays and Introductions 18). Arthur Symons’ “The Speaking of Verse” (1902), a reply to Yeats’s “Speaking to the Psaltery,” argues that Yeats’s methods would drift into intoning; Yeats then wrote a letter to the editor of the journal where Symons’ article appeared, stating his view that the artist should fix the pitch by notation in the speaking of poetry to musical notes (Jeffares 19). Experiments in this reading style had as their object “the distancing of the actor, the elimination of his own personality in so far as it is possible, in order that the words and the verse itself may retain their objective purity” (Jeffares 335). Yeats’s theory of speaking verse to music found an apostle in the actress Florence Farr, who was praised for her “ability to surrender to the poem, and to convey its formal qualities in live performance,” to play the role of “sensitive medium” for the poem’s “conveyance to the audience, rhapsodist rather than exponent, instrument rather than representative” (qtd. in Morrissinon 40). Yeats appreciated Farr’s “subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire,” the flatness of timbre of chanting, and offered that he spoke his own verses “in a kind of chant when [he] was making them” (Essays and Introductions 14).

In America, later in the century, the New Critic Yvor Winters, referring to the quasi-incantational reading style that he believes verse demands, proclaims that “Any poem which cannot endure the impersonal illumination of such a reading or which requires the assistance, whether expert or clumsy, of shouting, whispering, or other dramatic improvement, is to that extent bad poetry, though it may or may not be a good scenario for a vaudeville performance” (100). At one turn in his essay “The Audible Reading of Poetry,” first published in 1951, Winters recognizes that a “formal reading which avoids dramatic declamation will necessarily take on something of the nature of a chant,” but singles out Yeats as a poet who fell prey to its “dangers”: “[T]he reader may carry the procedure so far as to appear precious, and worse, he may deform syllables in the interests of what he considers musical intonation, much as a musical composer will draw syllables out or hurry over them in setting a poem to music. I never heard the late W. B. Yeats read aloud, but I have been told that he was guilty of both of these vices” (85). With an ear to Eliot’s 1946 Library of Congress recording of “The Waste Land,” Winters notes approvingly that “In those portions which exhibit a more or less definite rhythmic structure—for example, in Death by Water—Eliot reads more or less in the fashion which I am recommending, with a minimum of dramatic improvement on the
text, and with a maximum of attention to movement”; however, as he goes on to find, “in those portions of the poem—and they are the greater part of it—in which the rhythm does not cohere, in which the poem tends to fall apart in sandy fragments, Eliot reads dramatically; he does this with a good deal of skill, but most of what he puts into his voice is not in the poem—he descends to the practice of the actor who is salvaging a weak text” (86–87). Specifically, what Winters objects to is Eliot’s theatricalized performance of a cockney accent, an accent that Lionel Trilling cites as proof of Eliot’s desire to appeal to the masses: “anyone who has heard a record of Mr. Eliot reading The Waste Land will be struck by how much that poem is publicly intended, . . . by how much the full dialect rendition of the cockney passages suggests that it was even shaped for the music hall, by how explicit the poet’s use of his voice makes the music we are so likely to think of as internal and secretive” (119).

III

Stevens does not practice as an actor when he reads his poetry in public, does not put on dialects in impersonation of characters; indeed, one listener remarks that the person searching after “the stirring performance of a Dylan Thomas or the range of a Richard Burton” (see reviews of The Voice of the Poet on www.Amazon.com) will not find it in Stevens, who would seem to answer precisely Winters’ call for “formal reading,” a “restrained but formal chant . . . rendered as purely and as impersonally as possible” (85). But what is the effect of such a delivery style? What does the grain of Stevens’ voice—its tempo and pitch—tell us about his poems and his relationship to his poems and to poetry more generally? How do figures of utterance and audition in his work allegorize his understanding of the poet’s stance with respect to performance and publicity?

In February 1958, New York Times critic Thomas Lask observed, “The release by Caedmon of Wallace Stevens must be more an act of piety than of commerce, for it would be hard to think of a poet whose work is less effective on records than that of Stevens.” Asserting that, for Stevens, poetry was “less a mode of feeling than an intellectual act,” Lask goes on to note, “On this record the late poet is heard reading in a manner both calm and deliberate, but his work simply does not yield itself easily to aural assimilation.” Lask describes Stevens’ vocal style as “grave and solemn but with virtually no change in pace or in the pitch of the voice.” In customer reviews of tapes of Stevens reading his poetry on www.Amazon.com, we hear that “his auditory manner is majestically reflective, slow, & oracular,” that his “voice is slow and deep,” that “His readings show that he is rediscovering his own poems with each reading.” The poet J. D. McClatchy states that Stevens on record “reads with a stirring nobility,” a description that evokes Stevens’ vocal performance as embodiment of the intellectual ideal of nobility that the poet himself assigns in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1941) to his eloquent, prophetic “possible poet” (656).
Surely, these auditions accord with Stevens’ view of the hieratic function of the poet, at a distance from the vaudeville poetics of Lindsay.

Seamus Heaney responded to Stevens’ voice on tape as well, attracted by the music of his poetry in his mouth: “I will never forget hearing for the first time the voice of Wallace Stevens. I thought I knew the poems (I did know them to see, so to speak, on the page in print, I knew them in my own ear)—The Idea of Order at Key West, ‘She sang beyond the genius of the sea.’ But when Stevens spoke it, it was as if each vowel was housed in a cathedral which was in his own voice and it was magnificent.” Enacting his sense that “words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds” (663), Stevens enunciates clearly on the Caedmon recording, making each word ring, searching the sounds of the words. It should be noted, though, that he does not roll his consonants or draw out his vowels in performance as, for instance, Yeats does; he does not dramatize the sound, but realizes the sound’s inherent fullness. The poet Mark Strand finds of Stevens, “That he drones may be disconcerting at first, but the fact is, many poets drone as they press the sound of syllables into sense,” and he sees that “Stevens himself describes doing this” (61) in his 1923 ars poetica “Fabliau of Florida,” which closes with the lines “There will never be an end / To this droning of the surf” (18).

It is perhaps out of such a desire to shine light on the meaning of the words of his poetry (to “press the sound of syllables into sense”) that he reads in a formal and deliberate manner, often pausing in his reading of lines where there are no marks of punctuation to enforce pauses in such a way as to underscore syntactic groupings. Thomas Lask noted in his review of the 1956 Caedmon recording that “Stevens’ ideas do not rest on the single line or the condensed phrase, but on larger passages: a stanza or a series of triads.” The poet and critic Michael Schmidt marks this effect as well when he relates that “The first time I listened to Stevens’ 1954 recording of ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ the scales fell from my ears. Each line seemed to be endowed (in a quite unmechanical way) not with one but with two caesurae. This broke the apparent tyranny of the driving iamb, creating a suspension or a stillness, changing the nature of the emphasis and climax of the line.” Schmidt goes so far as to suggest that “Had Stevens been more calculating he might have considered laying out his lines in those descending, indenting triplets favored by William Carlos Williams,” as, for example,

She sang beyond the genius of the sea. (55)

“But,” Schmidt continues, “Stevens is nothing if not unostentatious in the presentation of his verse. . . . The two-caesura line in ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ is relatively widespread, and once we are alert to this counter-
pacing, which works against the traditional expectations we have of his line lengths, we find other Stevens poems similarly taking shapes, and making shapes, even more wonderful than those we had heard hitherto” (55–56). As Schmidt sees, Stevens was not interested in scoring breath units on the page as some of his fellow poets preferred to do, a practice that would become more prevalent in the wake of Charles Olson’s 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse.” Through frequent pauses, Stevens’ oral performance communicates a prosody his page does not, playing down both the robust musicality of the language and the music of the iamb.

In a 1961 PMLA essay, George Pace, insisting that “Only a very narrow theory of literary study sees the author’s reading as totally irrelevant,” also is drawn to these juncture groups, or rhythmic phrases, in Stevens’ performance of his poetry: “Is it of no literary interest that Wallace Stevens, reading his poetry aloud, broke it into small syntactic units by employing many more terminal junctures than his punctuation suggests or than readers would ordinarily use? His readings do not merely show an extreme concern to be understood but also constitute a kind of interpretation, a structural interpretation” (416). The poem he refers to here is the 1956 Caedmon recording of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Stevens’ slow-paced reading does suggest a desire to disambiguate utterance, to make clear a poetry that many thought was terribly unclear. His delivery style represents an attempt to explicate his poems, something that he was doing more often late in life despite a disinclination to do so. In light of this fact, it is probably not surprising that Stevens would seek to come into conformance with a restrained, “impersonal” recitation mode advocated by the reigning New Critical exegetes, focusing his attention on the resources of the voice to render syntactically and ideationally dense statements of the poem as legible.

That “The Idea of Order at Key West” should have attracted so much of the attention of appreciative Stevens listeners is appropriate, perhaps, since in many ways the poem is about vocalism and the effort to reconcile voices, to “harmonize the philosopher’s exoteric voice with the esoteric voice of the poet” (Blasing 91). One might say, too, that Stevens is seeking to impose order on reality—a major theme of that poem—through what Winters refers to as a “formal tone,” one that keeps himself out of the poem in his rendition of it, letting the rhythms of the poem speak themselves.

In “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens imagines “The poem of the mind” on “stage” speaking itself to “an invisible audience” that “listens” to it “slowly and / With meditation, speak words that in the ear, / In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat, / Exactly, that which it wants to hear” (218–19). In the first poem on the Caedmon recording, “Large Red Man Reading,” it is not the poem that performs itself but rather the title figure who reads aloud from “the poem of life” inscribed on “the great blue tabulae” of the sky with an audience of ghosts (another invisible audience) congregated to hear him. The red man’s poem speaks of commonplace things, “Of the
pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.” Yet, we find, the ghosts, hearing the poem of life, “would have wept to step barefoot into reality, / That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost / And cried out to feel it again” (365). This ghostly audience is matched by a ghostly reader on tape, a disembodied voice that further evokes the evanescence of life, as the poet-reader has crossed over to the world of the shades by the time the cassette is released (Stevens dies in 1955; the tape is issued posthumously in 1956).

Stevens’ play with the figures of utterance and audition are true to his feeling expressed in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” that “Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues and / To this returns” (144). A careful sounding of those figures and their relation to Stevens’ performance theory and practice resonate through his poems in expected and unexpected ways, clarifying for us and underwriting his attitudes about poetry and the poet in American modernism.

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Notes

1 Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 662. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

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———. “Marianne Moore.” Dial 75.6 (December 1923): 594–97.


Musical Transformations: Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry

LISA GOLDFARB

Music is not yet written but is to be.
The preparation is long and of long intent
For the time when sound shall be subtler than we ourselves.
—Wallace Stevens

I

WALLACE STEVENS’ MUSICALITY has long drawn the attention of his readers, for who in reading through his Collected Poems cannot help but hear the wind that whistles, the birds that sing, and the trumpets, horns, pianos, and guitars that sound throughout his verse? Many have noted his musicality, and much critical literature focuses on the seductive rhythms of particular poems, on their alternately cacophonous and harmonious sounds, and on their musical structure, most notably the sonata form of “Peter Quince at the Clavier” and Stevens’ frequent sequences of variations, from “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” to “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” As image, analogy, theme, and structure, Stevens’ practice of sound and music from early to late work is truly vast and multidimensional.

Because his representations of sound and music are so various and so persistent, Stevens’ poetry demands that we ponder whether there is a larger musical design at work that links poem to poem and book to book. For it is especially when we study Stevens’ work across poems and volumes that the deeper questions about his universe of sound emerge and beg for answers: Are the workings of sound distinct from the ideas of music so present in Stevens’ verse? Is there a relationship or hierarchy in his use of natural and instrumental sounds? If his sounds and musical forms point to a larger, more self-conscious musical project, how do we describe it, and how does it evolve over time? When Stevens writes of music in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” that “The preparation is long and of long intent / For the time when sound shall be subtler than we ourselves,”¹ he binds sound and music together and indicates a constant and “long” relationship between the two. He also suggests that we ap-
proach his poems not as achieved “Music,” but as “preparation” for it. We might read Stevens’ emphasis on the length of that “preparation”—it is “long and of long intent”—as a subtle invitation to us to read his poems for the way they both reach toward music and record his own search for a “musicalized” language in poetry.

Certainly, what John Hollander writes of Stevens’ verse in 1980, that music “is a kind of master trope of such complexity that merely to catalogue its elements can be bewildering” (235), still remains true. Nearly every critic on Stevens has, in some way, acknowledged the centrality of sound and music in his work. When Hollander goes on to say, “There is, in fact, hardly a scrap of traditional auditory mythology upon which Stevens has not improvised” (245–46), he heralds the wealth of critical material that has appeared in the past twenty-eight years, indeed dealing with every scrap: suggestions of sonatas, fugues, and symphonies; sound as image; rhythmic patterns; the influence of composers from Mozart to Stravinsky and Ives; and the list continues. Prominent among these critical studies are those that teach us new ways of reading Stevens, those which emphasize the “physicality” of his poetic language, such as Eleanor Cook’s work on Stevens’ wordplay and Anca Rosu’s detailed examination of the role of repetition and sound as performance in Stevens’ “metaphysics of sound.” Scholarship on particular poems has been prolific and the articles too numerous to detail. Among the many that stand out in recent years is George Lensing’s auditory analysis of “Autumn Refrain,” especially as it relates to his larger argument about the rhythms of the seasons in Stevens’ poems (74–83). Natalie Gerber’s study of how Stevens’ “shifts in rhythm lead to shifts in meaning” in such poems as “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (182) is also insightful for the way Gerber closely examines sonic patterns in Stevens’ work. Although recent criticism has deepened our understanding of the innovative and experimental ways with which Stevens approaches language and it has shed much light on the musical workings of specific poems and periods of his writing life, few critics have addressed the phenomenon writ large to study the relations between his myriad expressions of sound and music.

This essay revisits the larger questions that the relations between sound and music spur, and attempts to show in broad strokes how the two kinds of mimesis about which Cook quotes Seamus Heaney—poetry as “‘magical incantation, fundamentally a matter of sound’” and “‘as making wise and true meanings’” (“Introduction” 115)—come into play in Stevens’ musicality. To find a shape in Stevens’ many uses of sound and music is a daunting task, for, as we have just seen, the questions that his virtuosity prompts are large and multilayered. For the theoretical framework that we need to approach the subject of music in Stevens, I turn to Paul Valéry, to whom Stevens refers in a letter to Thomas McGreevy as a “prodigy of poetry” (L 868) and in whose work Stevens expressed a great deal of interest, particularly in later life. Valéry contends that in order to create the “lan-
gage dans un langage” [“language within a language”] (Oeuvres I 1324) that constitutes lyric poetry, the poet must undertake to transform ordinary language. When he theorizes and imagines that transformation, he presents his ideas in musical terms that strikingly suggest what Stevens does in his poems. Exploring the range of Stevens’ practice through Valéryan theory in such poems as “Earthy Anecdote,” “The Snow Man,” “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” and “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” helps us to appreciate the uncanny ways Stevens practices Valéryan poetics and, more important, to discern the larger musical design in Stevens’ work. When we probe the relations between sound and music in Stevens, we discover a narrative that underlies his verse, one that both traces and enacts the transformation of language into a distinctive kind of music.

II

At the heart of Valéry’s poetry and prose lies his fascination with music: it is “Le grand Art” [“The great art”] (Cahiers I 274) by which he often measures others and about which he wishes he understood more. In his notebooks, he sometimes laments the paucity of his musical knowledge, writing in one entry, “La musique m’aura manqué—et il me semble que j’aurais fait [quelque] chose de ce moyen” [“I missed out on music—and it seems to me that I would have done something with this means”] (Cahiers I 274). Such a lack, however, does not prevent him from asserting elsewhere the musical inspiration that underlies his own compositions. “Mon ‘inspiration,’ ” he writes in another entry, “n’est pas verbale. Elle ne procède pas par mots—Plutôt par formes musicales” [“My ‘inspiration’ is not verbal. It does not proceed by words—Rather by musical forms”] (Cahiers I 255).

When Valéry writes about poetry more broadly, he likewise borrows from music to explore the workings of his art. He contends that although poetry is well suited to express what every art longs to accomplish—“pour perpétuer, changer, chacun selon son essence, un moment d’éphémère délice en la certitude d’une infinité d’instant d’instants délicieux” [“to make last, to change, each one according to its own essence, a moment of ephemeral pleasure into the certainty of infinite delight”] (Oeuvres I 1364)—its dependence on language makes poetry particularly complex. It is ironic that those characteristics of language that are the most promising for the poet—the unlimited semantic and sonorous possibilities of words as well as the variations in individual and regional pronunciation and usage—make it an unruly tool for the artist. Valéry grapples with this difficulty in many essays and asserts: “Remarquez bien ces deux points: en dehors de son application aux besoins les plus simples et les plus communs de la vie, le langage est tout le contraire d’un instrument de précision” [“Note well these two points: outside of its application for the most simple and common needs of life, language is the contrary of a precise instrument”] (Oeuvres I 1366). He thus insists that the poet reconstitute language for
the purposes of poetry, and calls for a “nettoyage de la situation verbale” [“a cleansing of the verbal situation”] (Oeuvres I 1316). Music’s codified system of sound, as well as its scales and structures, often provides him ready metaphors for thinking about the more complicated poetic process.

Valéry describes in greater depth how the poet re-conceives or re-makes language according to musical principles in “Poésie et pensée abstraite” [“Poetry and Abstract Thought”] and “Propos sur la poésie” [“Comments about Poetry”], and in these essays he addresses a number of overlapping issues: the relation between sound and thought in poetry; poetic and dream states; and the nature of inspiration, just to name a few. Two principal ideas, however, underpin and propel his discussion of all of the above: first, according to Valéry, the poet aims to awaken in his reader a “sensation d’univers” [“sensation of a universe”] (Oeuvres I 1363) and, second, the process by which he transforms ordinary into poetic language to create this “sensation” is profoundly elusive, even enigmatic.

Valéry’s concept of a nascent universe is central to “Poésie et pensée abstraite” and “Propos sur la poésie” and he devotes a significant portion of both essays to its description. He maintains at the outset that he “commencerai par le commencement” [“will begin at the beginning”] (Oeuvres I 1361), which is to probe the meaning of the word “poetic”—how we use it and what it designates is his starting point. Importantly, Valéry distinguishes between how we use the word “poetic” to describe, on the one hand, a kind of emotion and, on the other, the poet’s craft. What human beings feel when we face a moving natural scene that excites our emotion, we often call “poetic”; he cites such natural wonders as sunsets, moonlight, and views of the sea and forest as spectacles that excite “poetic” emotion. Although nature spurs such poetic feeling spontaneously and unpredictably, “par hasard” [“by accident”] (Oeuvres I 1363), it is the unique province of the poet consciously to cultivate his language so as to offer us the means to retrieve or re-create those moments. It is thus, through his language, that the poet creates for his reader a “sensation d’univers.” Crucially, for our present study, Valéry describes this “nascent universe” as one that is “musicalized,” that is, a world that exists in a steady and almost magical relation to the one that we physically inhabit:

J’ai dit: sensation d’univers. J’ai voulu dire que l’état ou émotion poétique me semble consister dans une perception naissante, dans une tendance à percevoir un monde, ou système complet de rapports, dans lequel les êtres, les choses, les événements et les actes, s’ils ressemblent, chacun à chacun, à ceux qui peuplent et composent le monde sensible, le monde immédiat duquel ils sont empruntés, sont, d’autre part, dans une relation indéfinissable, mais merveilleusement juste, avec les modes et les lois de notre sensibilité générale. Alors, ces objets et ces êtres connus changent en quelque sorte de valeur. Ils
s’appellent les uns les autres, ils s’associent tout autrement que dans les conditions ordinaires. Ils se trouvent,—permettez-moi cette expression,—musicalisés, devenus commensurables, résonnants l’un par l’autre.

[I said: sensation of a universe. I wanted to say that the state or poetic emotion seems to me to consist of a nascent perception, a tendency to perceive a world, or a complete system of connections, in which beings, things, events, and actions resemble each to each, those that populate and compose the tangible or physical world, the immediate world from which they have been borrowed, as if they were themselves in an indefinable relationship, almost magically, with the ways and laws of our whole sensibility. Thus, these familiar objects and beings, in some way, change their value. They call to one another, they become associated with one another in a way that is out of the ordinary. They find themselves—permit me this expression—musicalized, having become commensurable, resonant one with the other.] (Oeuvres I 1363)

A large question for Valéry becomes, then, how the poet communicates a sense of a musicalized world to his readers. Valéry continually reminds us that at least as important to the poet as his own self-expression is the active relationship that he cultivates with his reader to awaken this sense. He writes in “Poésie et pensée abstraite,” “Un poète... n’a pas pour fonction de ressentir l’état poétique: ceci est une affaire privée. Il a pour fonction de le créer chez les autres. On reconnaît le poète... à ce simple fait qu’il change le lecteur en ‘inspiré’” [“A poet’s function is not to feel again the poetic state: this is a private business. He has the function of creating it in others. One recognizes the poet... by the simple fact that he changes the reader into the one who is inspired”] (Oeuvres I 1321). Valéry’s phrasing is key here, for he identifies the change or transformation that he effects in the reader at the very center of the poet’s activity.

It is here that we approach the second principal idea that underlies both essays, for the poet’s transformational task is twofold: he must transport the reader into the poetic world and hew from ordinary language the related, but distinct language of poetry. Valéry maintains, “[L]a poésie implique une décision de changer la fonction du langage” [“Poetry implies a decision to change the function of language”] (Oeuvres I 1372), and he must do all that is in his power using the multiple associations of words and available forms to create poetic language. Although Valéry’s discussion of the qualities of this enhanced language is remarkably lucid—his notion of the poetic pendulum is perhaps his most famous figure for poetry’s delicate balance between sound and sense—he also indicates that the transformation from ordinary to poetic language is essentially mysterious, and to articulate how it happens in critical language is notoriously
difficult. In “Poésie et pensée abstraite,” when he refers to the “langage dans un langage” that is poetry, he describes it as “ces mystères” [“these mysteries”] (Oeuvres I 1324). Of the union between sound and sense that necessarily happens in lyric poetry, Valéry writes that “c’est là une résultat proprement merveilleux” [“it is there where we find a truly marvelous result”] (Oeuvres I 1333), and he lingers on the word “merveilleux,” explaining poetry’s incantatory dimension and its connection to “l’antique magie” [“ancient magic”] (Oeuvres I 1333). When in “Propos sur la poésie” he discusses how hard it is to render an account of how the poet renews language, his own expression is marked by words that suggest this mystery and arduousness. He describes the critical terrain itself as “une voie bien épineuse” [“quite a thorny path”] and continues, “On y trouve des tourments infinis, des disputes qui ne peuvent avoir de fin, des épreuves, des énigmes” [“One finds there infinite torments, endless disputes, ordeals, enigmas”] (Oeuvres I 1375). When we wish to transform the words of daily usage that simply carry us from one point of understanding to the next (“le passage”) [“the passage”] (Oeuvres I 1317)—into a language with the capacity to enchant, we run into many risks. Of our reliance on words, Valéry writes, “Il ne faut point s’appesantir sur eux, sous peine de voir le discours le plus clair se décomposer en énigmes” [“One must not dwell on them too heavily, on the pain of seeing the clearest of discourses decompose into enigmas”] (Oeuvres I 1318). “Torments,” “mysteries,” “marvels,” and “enigmas” are, for Valéry, the stuff of poetry and poetic theory, and are the words that best characterize the transposition of ordinary to poetic language.

We discussed earlier Valéry’s interest in and admiration of music, yet more important than either the inspiration that it provides or his envy of what he imagines to be its purer or simpler form is that music helps him to articulate the mystery or enigma of poetic transformation. In the following passage, he asks us to imagine a world of pure sound and, more, how the poet might use the composer’s universe of sound as a model for his own poetic creation. What is most remarkable here, and which we will focus on shortly, is how Valéry’s concept of the musical-poetic analogy as a series of clearly articulated steps in our perception anticipates Stevens’ presentation of the world of sound and music in his poetry. Valéry writes:

Permettez-moi de fortifier cette notion d’ univers poétique en faisant appel à une notion semblable, mais plus facile encore à expliquer étant beaucoup plus simple, la notion d’ univers musical. . . Nous vivons par l’oreille dans le monde des bruits. C’est un ensemble généralement incohérent et irrégulièrement alimenté par tous les incidents mécaniques que cette oreille peut interpréter à sa façon. Mais l’oreille même détache de ce chaos un autre ensemble de bruits particulièrement remarquables et simples—c’est à-dire bien reconnaissables par notre sens, et qui
lui servent de repères. Ce sont des éléments qui ont des relations entre eux qui nous sont aussi sensibles que ces éléments eux-mêmes. L’intervalle de deux de ces bruits privilégiés nous est aussi net que chacun d’eux. Ce sont là les sons, et ces unités sonores sont aptes à former des combinaisons claires, des implications successives ou simultanées, des enchaînements et des croisements que l’on peut dire intelligibles: c’est pourquoi il existe en musique des possibilités abstraites.

[Permit me to strengthen this notion of a poetic universe by calling up a similar notion, but easier to understand being much more simple, of a musical universe. . . . We live by our ear in a world of noises. It is a generally incoherent whole and irregularly nourished by the mechanical incidents that this ear can interpret in its way. But the ear itself detaches from this chaos another harmony of sound particularly simple and noticeable—that is to say quite recognizable by our senses, which serves as a starting point. These are the auditory elements that have relations between them to which we are sensitive. The intervals between these sounds are as clear to us as they are to each other. This is where the sounds, and their sonorous unities are capable of creating, in and of themselves, clear combinations, successive or simultaneous combinations, linkages and crossings that one might say are intelligible; that is why there exist in music abstract possibilities.] (Oeuvres I 1326)

The world that Valéry imagines above is one in which our sense of hearing—our ear—is elemental. Although the attentive listener initially hears only the chaotic noise of the world, even amid the general “incoherence” he may detect sounds that are somewhat more “intelligible”; that is, there are particular sounds that we hear in relation to others and that promise more of an auditory order. Valéry suggests that these harmonic sounds (they are harmonic in their relation to one another), what he calls “unités sonores” [“sonorous unities”], are full of creative possibility: they work together to make combinations—“implications successives ou simultanées” [“successive or simultaneous combinations”]. In his combinatory images, Valéry indicates that “ce discernement entre des sensations pures et les autres a permis la constitution de la musique” [“this distinction between pure sensations and the others has permitted the constitution of music”] (Oeuvres I 1327). Equipped with musical “instruments de mesure” [“measuring instruments”] (what physical science has provided in the way of instruments such as tuning forks), the musician is able to create in a sustained way “Le monde de l’art musical, monde des sons . . . bien séparé du monde des bruits” [“The world of musical art, the world of sounds . . . completely separate from the world of noise”] (Oeuvres I 1327). One need only look at the following notebook entry to see the extent to
which Valéry uses this musical construct—the threefold progression from noise to sound to harmony—to understand his own process of composing poems: “Je me justifie par l’exemple du musicien qui traite par calculs d’harmonie, développe et transforme” [“I justify myself with the example of the musician who works by means of harmonic calculations, develops and transforms”] (Cahiers I 281).5

As important to our study of Stevens’ musical practice as the overall analogy that Valéry develops is the way that he extends it and describes further the “sensation d’univers” that he envisions for poetry. To emphasize music’s potential to awaken in the listener the sense of a universe, Valéry describes how even a single instrumental sound alerts the listener and creates the sense of a universe in the very midst of its becoming:

Dans cette salle où je vous parle, où vous entendez le bruit de ma voix, si un diapason ou un instrument bien accordé se mettait à vibrer, aussitôt, à peine affectés par ce bruit exceptionnel et pur, qui ne peut pas se meler avec les autres, vous auriez la sensation d’un commencement, le commencement d’un monde; une atmosphère tout autre serait sur-le-champ créée, un ordre nouveau s’annoncerait, et vous-mêmes, vous vous organiserez inconsciemment pour l’accueillir. L’univers musical était donc en vous, avec tous ses rapports et ses proportions—

[In this room where I speak to you, where you hear the noise of my voice, if a diapason or a well-tuned instrument were to begin to vibrate, all of a sudden, hardly affected by this exceptional and pure sound, that could not blend with the others, you would have the sensation of a beginning, the beginning of a world; an atmosphere would arise out of the blue, a new order would announce itself, and you yourselves, you would unconsciously ready yourselves to welcome it. The musical universe is therefore within you, with all of its rapports and proportions—] (Oeuvres I 1327)

As much as the instrumental sound announces an emergent world that we recognize and are ready to embrace, and is indeed part of ourselves, Valéry also stresses how fragile this “[l]’univers musical” is; its magic is as easily broken by the contrary experience. If, he explains, we find ourselves in the concert hall immersed in symphonic music and suddenly there is a random noise (Valéry cites a chair that falls, a person who coughs, or a door that slams), “Quelque chose d’indéfinissable, de la nature d’un charme ou d’un verre de Venise, a été brisé ou fendu” [“Something indefinable happens, as if a charm or a Venetian glass, had broken or cracked”] (Oeuvres I 1327). I emphasize the delicate nature of the musical or poetic world, for it is precisely this dynamic—the intermittent harmony and disruption—that Stevens enacts in his poems.
Valéry’s discussions of music do not cease with the way that a musical vocabulary helps him to clarify the various stages of poetic creation. Rather, it seems that at each juncture of his poetic theory, wherever he meets with the denser and more elusive material of language—“les fluctuations phonétiques et sémantiques” [“phonetic and semantic fluctuations”], where “[c]haque mot est un assemblage instantané d’un son et d’un sens, qui n’ont point de rapport entre eux” [“each word is an instantaneous combination of sound and sense, with no connection between the two”] (Oeuvres I 1328)—he turns to music, the art of pure sound, to elucidate the workings of his own art. Although he subtly suggests that the poet undertake a project of poetic musicalization, one that might lift language, in all its complexity, to the level of music, he does not ask the poet to purge language of its many associations, but rather to exploit and balance them, to put into rhythmic play poetic words and forms that we repeat “pour leur étrangeté et leur mystère” [“for their foreignness and their mystery”] (Oeuvres I 1329). Similar, then, to the way the composer ascends from the level of noise to the harmonies of music, Valéry envisions a poet, and I cannot help but think of Stevens as that poet, who in a renewed language, in Stevens’ words, “can set the abstraction on which so much depends to music” (786). For Stevens explores Valéry’s musical vision in his poems, carving from the mixture of auditory and mental stimuli a language capable of realizing the world within the world toward which we, along with the poet, aspire, moving with him from one sensory level to another: from noise to sound, from sound to harmony, and from harmony to the most intricate musical-poetic combinations.

III

Stevens dynamically enacts in his poetry the very questions about linguistic transformation that Valéry raises in theory. He gestures toward Valéry’s understanding of the necessity for a renewal of poetic language in many poems, writing, for instance, in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” “The words of things entangle and confuse” (33) and in “The Poems of Our Climate,” the “imperfect, . . . so hot in us, . . . Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds” (179). Stevens seems to trace the transformation from “these stubborn sounds” to a harmony throughout his poetry; however, his is not a linear tale that takes us through an easy route from “preparation” to transcendence. Rather, reading Stevens’ work across poems and periods demonstrates that this creative process—the grappling with and the harnessing of the raw noise of the world (both natural and human) into a poetic language “subtler than we ourselves” through a series of steps—is ever-present at all stages of his career. Stevens ushers us into a world in which, at one moment, we hear noise punctuated by sound and, at the next, we meet with poems that celebrate the fruits of their harmonic promise. All along the way, he points to the difficulty of the musical-poetic transformation that he seeks. It is not surprising that Stevens is the one
who best describes the arc of his poetry, when he writes in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “A mountainous music always seemed / To be falling and to be passing away” (147).

As if to summon the reader into the auditory search for order (or harmony), Stevens begins Collected Poems with intrusive natural sounds to which the sensitive listener (reader) responds. In “Earthy Anecdote,” “Every time the bucks went clattering / Over Oklahoma / A firecat bristled in the way” (3). Stevens choreographs the motion of the animals in five short stanzas that approximate their movement, which is swift and constant (“Every time the bucks went clattering”). The lines hurtle forth, as the “bucks” and “firecat” move in relation to one another—“Wherever they went, / They went clattering,” first “To the right” (stanza 2), and then “To the left” (stanza 3) (3). Repetitions of verbs emphasize both their continuous motion (“went clattering,” “bristled,” “swerved,” “clattered,” “went leaping”) and their reciprocal responses to one another. But most important to our study, Stevens draws the reader into their dynamic motion in the sounds of the language. As Cook points out, “Earthy Anecdote,” “a poem of firstness, of origins” (“Place Names” 182), also has a careful rhetorical scheme that emphasizes the bucks’ “clattering” in its sound patterns: the hard c sounds (/k/) reverberate through each stanza—“Clattering,” “Oklahoma,” “firecat,” “circular,” “because,” “closed”—and announce the preparatory note of the collection.

In many poems Stevens embraces Valéry’s notion that “Nous vivons par l’oreille dans le monde des bruits” [“We live by our ear in a world of noises”] (Oeuvres I 1326), and he frequently singles out our sense of hearing as primary in our perception. In early poems, Stevens’ poetic persona is someone who listens, intently focused on deciphering the sounds that abound in nature. In “The Snow Man,” Stevens first offers us the bare winter landscape and then heightens its bareness by having us imagine, along with the “listener, who listens in the snow,” the “misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves, / Which is the sound of the land” (8). His repetitions of “sound” (three times) and “listen” / “listener” (twice) convey the centrality of the ear in our grasp of the world around us. The ear again is central in “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shore,” though this time Stevens’ speaker measures his own attention by how much the “ear” takes in of the “noise the motion of the waves / Made on the seaweeds and the covered stones.” Here he writes that they “Disturbed not even the most idle ear” (18). The word “ear” is in fact woven into the texture of many poems, almost as if Stevens is urging his readers to pay that sense particular attention, as he does again in “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” when the speaker of the poem says to the secondary figure: “Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear. / Use dusky words and dusky images” (69). In all these poems, Stevens uses the ear as a basic measure for our relation to the external world—the earth, the winter, the sea, and the night.
Stevens animates Valéry’s concept in “Poésie et pensée abstraite” that the natural world of sound is “généralement incohérent et irrégulièrement alimenté par tous les incidents mécaniques que cette oreille peut interpréter à sa façon” [“a generally incoherent whole irregularly nourished by the mechanical incidents that this ear can interpret in its way”] (Oeuvres I 1326). One of the most consistent features of Stevens’ verse, well noted by his readers, is the mass of raw natural sounds that whisper and thunder in poem after poem. We hear the “cackle of the toucans” (41) in “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,” the “grackles crack their throats of bone in the smooth air” (49) in “Banal Sojourn,” as well as the crowing cock in “Depression Before Spring.” In “How to Live. What to Do,” Stevens’ signature wind falls upon the “man and his companion . . . In many majesties of sound” (102–03), while it “whistled in a sepulchral South” (97) in “Farewell to Florida.” To underscore the abundance of the noises and sounds in the world, Stevens draws them into the poems themselves. We hear the “Piperoo, pippera, pipperum” of the “stars . . . Flying like insects” (211) in “On an Old Horn,” the “miff-maff-muff of water” (364) in “Page from a Tale,” and the gentle “Rou cou” (441) of the dove in “Song of Fixed Accord.” Such untamed sounds of nature (also filtered through the poet’s imagination, as in the case of the sounds of the stars) persist in each volume of Stevens’ work; it is his way of demonstrating Valéry’s assertion that the world of sound in which we live is a generally incoherent whole, within which we find some sounds suggestive of a larger possible order. These natural sounds are frequently jarring and invasive, yet from time to time they are gentle enough so that the listener—whether he is the speaker who asks the wind for clarification in “To the Roaring Wind” or Professor Eucalyptus, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” who listens to “The tink-tonk / Of the rain in the spout” (406)—can discern through them what Valéry calls a more “intelligible” sound.

One of the more difficult questions in both Valéry’s theory and in Stevens’ practice is precisely how the poet culls from these more intelligible sounds the materials to create a harmony analogous to that achieved, according to Valéry, so much more simply or naturally in music. Valéry writes in “Propos sur la poésie” that through his sense of hearing, which he calls the most developed attentive sense—“l’ouïe, qui est le sens par excellence de l’attente et de l’attention” [“hearing which is the sense, par excellence, of attention and attentiveness”] (Oeuvres I 1369)—the poet, like the composer, patiently “détache de ce chaos un autre ensemble de bruits particulièrement remarquables et simples—c’est-à-dire bien reconnaissables par notre sens, et qui lui servent de repères” [“detaches from the chaos of noise another series of sounds that are highly recognizable through our senses and serve as starting points”] (Oeuvres I 1326) for the creation of a harmonic whole. These sounds, he contends, readily combine to form what we know to be the material of music—or poetry. Yet this process is not nearly as ready as Valéry makes it seem in the passage we
examined earlier. Although Valéry closely studies the properties of language, music, and poetry to forge a poetic system that might enable the poet to create a harmony similar to that of music, he often underlines the poet’s difficult task and points to the enigmatic nature of musical-poetic transformation. Stevens too explores this difficult process in his poems: there are so many sounds and voices, so many varieties of musical instruments; even though they sometimes achieve a kind of harmony, they also often fall short of their promise. Again Stevens vivifies Valéry’s analytical discussion in poems that portray both the arduousness of the poetic process and the intermittent sought-after harmony.

First, Stevens suggests, like Valéry, that for the modern poet to create a harmony, he must attune his own breath and voice to the rhythm of the surrounding world. When he writes in “Two Figures in a Dense Violet Night,” “Be the voice of night and Florida in my ear” (69), Stevens suggests that the poetic speaker must be able to absorb the external world and reorder it so that it might be heard. In “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” Stevens conveys a sense of how intently we wait to hear those sounds so that we have a chance to “capture” them. Stevens’ use of the language of struggle indicates the intensity of this process. He writes, “To-night, night’s un-deciphered murmuring / Comes close to the prisoner’s ear, becomes a throat / The hand can touch” (235). Stevens’ “prisoner,” who may be no more prisoner than we are, as conscious humans in a natural world, aims to decode and express the world about him.

Stevens, perhaps, comes closest to describing the way the poet must internalize the sounds about him in the later “Chocorua to Its Neighbor.” As the speaker meditates on the meaning of his own utterances, he probes their relation to the wider world of spirit and sound:

The cry is part. My solitaria
Are the meditations of a central mind.
I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
That is my own voice speaking in my ear. (265)

The persona contemplates the relation of the external cry (“the simplest soldier’s cry” [265]) to his own “solitaria” (his own thoughts) and, as he does so, the lines proceed haltingly with two full stops in the first two lines, as if to approximate the difficulty of grasping the relation of one to the other. Once, however, he assimilates the sound—“I hear the motions of the spirit”—Stevens seems to point to what Valéry might call the enigmatic moment of musical-poetic transformation. The physical sound brings with it “what is secret,” which, in turn, “becomes” the poet’s own voice. Stevens suggests, then, that the persona must, at least momentarily, merge with the sounds of the external world so much that he speaks them, and when he can, Stevens’ poems proclaim the resultant harmony. Such a
harmonious moment comes in the early “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” when the speaker, whom we might see as anticipating Chocorua, questions the sea sounds that surround him and cries in the penultimate stanza, “Out of my mind the golden ointment rained, / And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard” (51).

Stevens summons a veritable orchestra as flourishes to the poet’s own voice to further enliven what he calls in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The complicate, the amassing harmony” (348). Yet these instruments tell the same story as that of the human voice. Sometimes their sounds, like the piano’s “arpeggios” (107) in “Mozart, 1935” or the outmoded form of the waltz in “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” miss their mark, because they are not attuned to the sound of “the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cachinnation” (107). At other times, instruments announce harmonic possibility, as in the later “Credences of Summer,” when “The trumpet of morning blows in the clouds and through / The sky” (325) to proclaim the vitality of the present as a harmonious whole.

What is particularly striking about Stevens’ sense of harmony in relation to Valéry’s is their mutual idea of “possibility.” In “Poésie et pensée abstraite,” Valéry suggests the abstract promise of the world of sound when he writes that “ces unités sonores sont aptes à former des combinaisons claires” [“sonorous unities are capable of creating clear combinations”] (Oeuvres I 1326) in the delicate balance between sound and sense that allows us, in the reading of the poem, a momentary sense of a harmonic whole. Stevens beautifully echoes Valéry’s notion of harmonic possibility in his late poem “A Primitive Like an Orb,” when he describes poetry:

We do not prove the existence of the poem.  
It is something seen and known in lesser poems.  
It is the huge, high harmony that sounds  
A little and a little, suddenly,  
By means of a separate sense. It is and it  
Is not and, therefore, is. In the instant of speech,  
The breadth of an accelerando moves,  
Captives the being, widens—and was there. (378)

Stevens’ speaker may initially assert the impossibility of “proof” when it comes to poetry, yet in the interplay between what “It is” and what “it / Is not,” and in the pacing of the above lines, he seems to render such proof possible, nearly fixing in language what is ever in motion. The language is marked by a blending of insistent repetitions—“It is,” “A little and a little”—and logical terms—“therefore”—that carries the reader through the “instant” of recognition. Stevens’ assertion that we perceive this possibility “By means of a separate sense” stunningly recalls Valéry’s discussion of the “langage dans un langage” that is poetry. His use of the musical
term “accelerando” likewise suggests that it is through the musicalization of language that we can feel our part in “the huge high harmony.”

That Stevens’ auditory and musical search comprises a larger design is perhaps most clear when we look at the last poem in Collected Poems, “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” and consider the way that Stevens frames the whole collection. Although in “Earthy Anecdote,” he sets the relation between the sound (the clattering of the bucks) and our sense (the firecat) in motion, and hints that the dynamic between them is a source of creativity, in this last poem he seems to dramatize Valéry’s threefold process—from noise to sound to harmony.

The poem begins with a noise that the poetic persona hears, one whose origin he attempts to identify in each successive stanza. This six-stanza poem advances in units of two and, in the first, Stevens pierces the quiet of late winter with a mysterious noise, one that his listener cannot easily identify.

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird’s cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind. (451)

Stevens begins with a sense of temporal and seasonal certainty—it is not simply winter, but “the earliest ending of winter, / In March.” The sound, too, is specific—not simply an undifferentiated noise but “a scrawny cry.” In the second stanza, we learn more of its nature, that it is “A bird’s cry.” At the same time that the language seems to point to a particular moment in time and a particular sound, however, Stevens counterpoints this specificity with uncertainty. Though the cry seemed a natural one, “from outside,” it also “Seemed like a sound in his mind.”

The speaker’s assertion in stanza two that “He knew that he heard it” seems to indicate a growing certainty, as George Lensing asserts: “The waking man confidently ‘knew that he heard it’ and that its sound was true” (229). However, one might also read Stevens’ tone alternatively. Since he still cannot squarely locate its source, to try to pinpoint it, the speaker says with a measure of ambiguity, “He knew that he heard it” (my emphasis). Uncertainty also provokes repetition, and Stevens’ repetition here of the time, “at daylight or before,” and season, “In the early March wind,” might also serve to underline the mysterious cry as well as the speaker’s wish to locate more accurately the sound in time and place. Stevens aptly titles “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” for we can see, too, how he composes it by rendering the “cry” or “the thing itself” in the sound structure of the lines. Sharp sounds—“March,” “scrawny,” “cry”—
along with sibilants—"scrawny," "outside," "Seemed," "sound"—issue forth the "cry" in the poem and alternate with the soft sounds and internal rhyming—"earliest," "knew," "heard," "early"—that express the winter’s quiet and the listener’s attentive posture. Such soft sounds further set off and accentuate the startling nature of the cry.

In the next two stanzas, Stevens emphasizes just how difficult a process it is for the listener (the poet) to place the cry’s source, and he draws us further into the persona’s interior drama. He wrestles with whether the sound was a product of his dream or clearly a bird’s cry:

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside. (452)

Stevens’ use of verbs in the past progressive tense indicates the break of day—“The sun was rising” and later “The sun was coming”—as if to suggest that with more light, the persona might be better able to discern the nature and location of the cry. However, rather than “elucidating” the “cry,” the sun (which frames these two stanzas) only intensifies the mystery of the sound and the seeming futility of his search. His use of negatives—“No longer a battered panache above snow” and later, “It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché”—underlines how hard it is for him to distinguish precisely the sound’s origin. Ellipses too further stress the persona’s puzzled and inconclusive thought. Though he determines that the sound does not exactly come from sleep, neither does it issue clearly from “outside”—for in the last line of the fourth stanza, Stevens writes not that the “sound” or “cry” came from outside, but that “The sun was coming from outside” (my emphasis). Given Stevens’ penchant for French words, and his use of them in stanza four (“panache,” “papier-mâché”), one wonders whether he also calls our attention not only to the physical rising sun, but also to the French son [sound] and the centrality of the cry itself.

It is precisely at the moment of least certainty—in the transition to the last two stanzas—that Stevens seems to bring to life Valéry’s notion of the mystery or enigma of poetic transformation. Though the speaker cannot locate the precise origin of the sound that awakens him, what he does know is that this sound, the “cry from outside” (stanza one), which becomes his own, mysteriously transforms into the musical sound, the c that promises a greater harmony. Stevens marks this transformation with a changed, sure tone:
That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (452)

Stevens’ c thus brings forth the sun’s “choral rings” and, in turn, ushers in “A new knowledge of reality,” one that bears a remarkable resemblance to Valéry’s “sensation d’univers,” his “musicalized” world. Helen Vendler locates in “that scrawny cry” Stevens’ “sublime” for the way a new kind of grandeur issues from nature’s bareness. Crucially, though, this c at the close of this last poem is “Still far away.” Yet, however distant the sound may be at the end of the poem, the hard insistent c (/k/) sounds that echo through these lines—“scrawny,” “chorister,” “choir,” “colossal”—remind the reader of the c that opens Collected Poems, the sounds of the “clattering bucks” and the responsive “firecat” in “Earthy Anecdote.” Stevens’ last poem, then, bends us back to the beginning of the collection, and to the initial poem of “firstness” (Cook, “Place Names” 182). Thus, Stevens enacts precisely what Valéry calls for in “Poésie et pensée abstraite”: “il change le lecteur en ‘inspiré’” [“he changes the reader into the inspired one”] (Oeuvres I 1321), structuring his work so as to ask us to listen again and to re-create the music in all of the poems in between.

Looking at the variety of Stevens’ musical and auditory images with Valéryan theory in mind, then, helps to clarify Stevens’ own musical poetry. Although many readers acknowledge, and sometimes rue, the poetic process as the subject of so many of Stevens’ poems, they do not necessarily see the rich musical drama at the heart of this process. Stevens does not simply write about the craft of poetry in his poems; he carries us back to the auditory roots of language and brings a poetic world into being by way of his musical-poetic transformations. In the unfolding of this creation (one might even see the process as a new kind of creation myth), he uses all of the auditory and musical images and structures that he can summon: bird calls and sea sounds; human breath and speech; wind and thunder; pianos, trumpets, horns, and oboes; sonatas, fugues, and variations. Valéryan theory helps us to imagine Stevens’ larger, more unified musical project and to understand more fully the ways he brings a poetic world to life through sound.

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Notes

1Wallace Stevens, Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, 128. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

2Stevens discusses Valéry intermittently in essays and letters alike, though it is particularly in later life that he shows this poet more sustained interest. For a brief overview of the relative critical neglect of this important literary relationship, see my essay “The Figure Concealed’: Valéryan Echoes in Stevens’ Ideas of Music,” 39–42.

3All translations of Valéry’s work are my own.

4Valéry uses the figure of a pendulum to demonstrate the intrinsic relation between sound and sense in lyric poetry in “Poésie et pensée abstraite” as follows: “Le pendule vivant qui est descendu du son vers le sens tend à remonter vers son point de départ sensible, comme si le sens même qui se propose à votre esprit ne trouvait d’autre issue, d’autre expression, d’autre réponse que cette musique même qui lui a donné naissance” [“The living pendulum which descends from the sound toward the sense tends to rise again toward its point of departure, as if the sense that presents itself to your mind finds no other source, no other expression, no other answer but this very music which gave it birth”] (Oeuvres I 1332).

5Reuven Tsur, in What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive, provides a linguistic underpinning to Valéry’s sense of the passage from sound to meaning, and lends us a more precise vocabulary to Valéry’s understanding of the threefold process from noise to sound to harmony. He writes of the relation between speech and non-speech modes: “one might reasonably speculate that the poetic mode of speech perception is characterized by some way of overcoming this channel separation or specialization. . . . In the poetic mode, some nonspeech qualities of the signal seem to become accessible, however faintly, to consciousness” (12–13).

6Beverly Maeder and Peter Middleton address the relationship between natural and human sound. Maeder rightly sees Stevens’ “questioning the relationship between natural and made sound, and problematizing the aspiration toward a transcendence that romanticism had linked with the forces and signs of nature” (27). It is, in part, my aim here to demonstrate how Stevens refigures that “transcendence” to a sense of “possibility.” Middleton too focuses on distinctions between “natural” and human sound, and he details a compelling historical argument for understanding how Stevens represents both.

7George Lensing offers a careful and insightful reading of “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” in Wallace Stevens and the Seasons. William Davis, too, in “This Refuge that the End Creates: Stevens’ ‘Not Ideas about the thing but the Thing Itself,’” has written an excellent and thorough essay on this poem from the vantage point of sound.

8Eleanor Cook discusses Stevens in relation to her concept of the “Sibylline” or “perpetual” type of enigma in her book Enigmas and Riddles in Literature. At the close of her chapter on Stevens, she relates Stevens’ admiration for Valéry’s notion of poetic language to Stevens’ use of the word “enigma” in “The Sail of Ulysses.” My attention to the term “enigma” in relation to Valéry’s discussion of the musicalization of language is indebted to Cook’s study of the trope of enigma, as is my reading of the transformative moment in “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself.”

9Of Stevens’ sublime in “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” Helen Vendler writes: “It is not the triumph of the trumpeting imagination but the scrawny cry of its emergent birth that represents Stevens’ utmost sublime. It is a sublime of denuded language, a sublime of indicative effort as the pale sunshine and scrawny cry of March testify to the wish to transform winter into spring” (694).
Davis, William. “‘This Refuge that the End Creates’: Stevens’ ‘Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself.’” Wallace Stevens Journal (Fall 1987): 103–10.
Poems

A Portrait of the Artist and Child

The painter gathers on a tablecloth
Of basic blue a coffee cup and saucer,
A cracked glass pitcher and a plate, on which
He further gathers pears and nectarines,
Grapes, overripe bananas and an apple.
While he looks out the window, mixing oil
And russet pigments, fruit flies settle on
The mixed arrangement, pimples of cool sweat
Form on the grapes, and the yellow evening light
Moves almost imperceptibly across
The glass. His daughter, from her heap of toys,
Looks up to watch the life that’s still unstillled.

Casey Ward
Columbus, Ohio

The Insubstantial Hand

The outward sense of things turned in,
And then turned inside out, though not
Completely turned—the green grass red
Or rabbits roosting in the eaves—
But the phantasms of the mind
Substantiated by the turn,
The slow work of the insubstantial
Hand within the mind, which sets
The rabbit in the snow-domed brush,
Combs the grasses with the wind,
And fixes speech in its becoming.

Casey Ward
Columbus, Ohio
It’s a quick climb to the second-floor apartment. Her legs were shorter then. Opening the door, she falls into the Wedgewood jar of the living room, a blue world whose patterned white figures freeze in their dance. Two steps up to her parents’ bedroom their turbulence knocks the wind out of her as she watches years later. I turn and walk as if leaving a stage Wallace Stevens descended in lonely purple air to find himself more truly and more strange, the walls sliced open by words, so she covers her ears. The air roars now as a plane takes off, rifling the books on the shelves, tearing up the lives on paper, rewriting history as snow blowing in the same bare place between mind and sky, between thought and day and night. This is why the poet is always in the sun, pointing her finger at the moon, meeting his shadow in a book.

I’m walking room to room now, hearing echo clamber through summer dark. Sunburst through drawn shades ignites their edges.

Smell of burning metal may be an overlooked pot but no one has cooked in this kitchen for years. She crosses the floor passing through a final door and is flooded with sun on three sides streaming over North Sixth Street rooftops. I sit on a folding chair and feel the unraveling again in my veins. It’s always like this for the child not knowing what to do, how to live, then the light graces her like a hand through the window, fills her all the way down the fire escape to her sandbox, then back up the iron stairs.
drawn by music from the radio.
There’s my paintbox, brush, paper Mother gave me,
the glass of water, the Chordettes singing,

and she paints twelve shades of yellow—
canary, buttercup, marigold across the page
with a big blue sun, small ruby bird.

I enter the heart of the flower shining.
The page shines all night like a flashlight under covers.
She takes the brush, moves my hand across the page,

still in her pajamas, the light keeps shining.
My hand keeps moving writing wayward names
to see what won’t go away. Her hand keeps moving

far back all those rooms I came through. She writes this.

Heather Thomas
Reading, Pa.
Still Life

for Wallace Stevens

Bowl on a table,
apples and pears painted
in hues of yellow, brassy red,
touches of brown and green.

No longer any need of the sun,
any sliver of the moon,
they cast their own shadow,
their own color

like memory
in the aura of its own light

bathed in oil and ochre,
mineral and clay

like voice beyond
the wake of its own silence

reaching the observer
as the observer wills.

Brian Michael Tracy
Manhattan Beach, Calif.

Leon Surette’s new book sets out to complicate what he considers two commonplaces of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens criticism: that Eliot was perennially hostile to humanism and that Stevens’ characteristic worldview is best described as humanist. On the contrary, he claims, the early Eliot was tempted by the humanist perspective and the later Stevens became disenchanted with it. Both ultimately found twentieth-century humanism unsatisfying. The reasons animating their dissatisfaction diverge; Surette, owing in part to the wealth of Eliot’s prose arguments on the subject, is at his best when discussing him. His analysis of Eliot’s relationships with Irving Babbitt, Bertrand Russell, J. M. Robertson, and others is illuminating, as is his treatment of Eliot’s many reviews of books on religion and philosophy during the First World War. Surette’s extensive research into the little magazines, reviews, and journals of politics and culture of the first half of the twentieth century is also useful and aids in achieving one of the aims of the book: to understand both Stevens and Eliot against the backdrop of a common intellectual conversation about humanism and religion.

Surette takes his title from a quotation from Eliot: “Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding that dilemma, you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist” (3). He simplifies Eliot’s dilemma, however, so that sometimes it denotes the mere “loss of faith in Judaeo-Christian beliefs” (4), or, in other places, the choice between humanism and those beliefs. In doing so, he unfortunately reduces the complexity of Eliot’s problematic. Eliot’s dilemma is not about the choice between humanism and theism, but about the fact that humanism is not really a legitimate choice at all. Humanism suffers, he claims, from its attempt to occupy the intermediate space between naturalism’s “below” and supernaturalism’s “above.” For Eliot there is no such space: human beings are either less than they seem, and their cherished ideals and self-understandings are reducible to the brute natural processes (the “below”) from which they emerged; or, they are more than they seem, and what distinguishes them from the rest of the natural world is attributable to their supernatural origins (the “above”). In repudiating religion, humanism claims to be naturalist, but that very naturalism undermines its own aspirations. Its faith in reason, progress, and ethical perfectibility cannot be derived from nature, and thus it presupposes supernature. Without the latter, Eliot writes—in the same essay from which Surette’s quotation is drawn—the natural “human” turns out to be “no more than an extremely clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal” (“Second Thoughts About Humanism,” Selected Essays 1917–1932 [Harcourt, Brace, 1932], 397).
This complex dilemma can be restated in a formula that remains inchoate in Surette’s book: we can no longer believe, but the substitutes that might replace that belief seem inadequate, whether morally, politically, or imaginatively. For Eliot, the dilemma was insoluble, which meant that he eventually had to believe. The formula works for Stevens, too, though he, unlike Eliot, considered the first horn of the dilemma non-negotiable. As he writes in “Connoisseur of Chaos”—perhaps with Eliot in mind—“We cannot go back to that” (Collected Poetry and Prose [Library of America, 1997], 195).

Surette argues, rightly, that Stevens’ poetic project was animated by a search for an adequate substitute for religion. He is also right to argue that, although what Stevens called “humanism” initially attracted him, he became more ambivalent toward it as his career progressed: on this issue his letters are clear if terse. But Surette is often wrong about the details of this ambivalence. For instance, a centerpiece of his argument is that Ideas of Order “represents a move away from the Humanist and post-Christian posture” (200) of the earlier poems. This is a peculiar claim to make about a collection that includes “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” “How to Live. What To Do,” “Botanist on Alp (No. 2),” “A Fading of the Sun,” “Winter Bells,” and “Anglais Mort à Florence.” “A Fading of the Sun” is manifestly a humanist poem and discloses the stance that Stevens consistently found most attractive about humanism: an ethos of self-reliance and self-fashioning. Indeed, he writes in a letter, “In A FADING OF THE SUN the point is that, instead of crying for help to God or to one of the gods, we should look to ourselves for help. The exaltation of human nature should take the place of its abasement” (L 295). “How to Live. What to Do,” a poem that Stevens said “so definitely represents my way of thinking” (L 293), celebrates, as a form of heroism, the human divestment of religious dependence: the two companions joyously exult in the cold wind of a disenchanted world, where there is “No chorister, nor priest” (CPP 103).

In “Anglais Mort à Florence,” the speaker wistfully remembers a time when “he stood alone” without the help of “God . . . and the police” (CPP 120)—the metaphysical and political emblems of authoritarianism, respectively. However, I do not find this stance of Stevens’ particularly compelling. As the philosopher Charles Taylor would say, the moral prestige with which Stevens imbues the stance is conflated with the logical necessity that purportedly makes the stance necessary, to the point where the stance validates the metaphysical opinion rather than vice versa. The posture radiates a feeling of “freedom, power, control, invulnerability, and dignity” (Taylor, A Secular Age [Harvard UP, 2007] 286), which makes the intellectual rejection of religion seem all the more inevitable. But, like it or not, this humanistic ethos is pervasive throughout Stevens’ career.

Just as Surette is mistaken about what Stevens found attractive in humanism, he is also mistaken about why Stevens found it inadequate. His basic contention is that Stevens’ criticisms of humanism are animated by a residual love of transcendence. Stevens is, according to this argument, “unhappy with the secular limitations of Humanism, committed as he is to imagining a world beyond ourselves” (230). It is true that Stevens wants to imagine a fictive, “leaner being” (L 434) than human beings as they currently stand, but this is
only “beyond” in the sense that a goal is beyond, not in the sense that God, or some transcendent reality, is beyond. In almost every place that Stevens speaks of a “beyond,” the formula includes a “yet”: “The Man with the Blue Guitar” seeks a tune “‘beyond us, yet ourselves’” (CPP 135), and Santayana’s convent world is “beyond the eye . . . yet not far beyond” (CPP 432). The “yets” chasten any supposition of transcendence beyond that which takes place in the imagination, which is not a place at all.

Indeed, Stevens’ suspicions of humanism often derive less from a desire for transcendence than from an anti-humanist perspective that subsumes the human person into the immanent, impersonal processes of the material world. This is the world of “The Course of a Particular,” in which one finds “the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves” (CPP 460), or of “The Region November,” in which the trees are like “a critic of God, the world / And human nature” (CPP 473). In these moods Stevens takes up the challenge of Eliot’s “naturalism,” where everything comes from “below.” Eliot’s dilemma is resolved, not by a return to supernatural belief, but through a participation in the strange power from “below” that surpasses, or overwhelms, the claims of human distinctness. It is not that the “human nature” he sought to exalt in “The Fading of the Sun” is in any way abased, but simply that, like the ferryman in “The River of Rivers in Connecticut,” human nature cannot “bend against” the “propelling force” (CPP 451) of material becoming. Unlike Eliot, who finds this force disturbing, Stevens finds in it a “gayety.” His pleasure in the sheer fecundity, plenitude, and splendor of the world’s constant motion, without regard for its lack of justice or progressive telos, sits as uneasily with the secular humanism of the Enlightenment tradition as it does with Platonism or Christianity.

It is true then, as Surette argues, that Stevens “is unhappy with the secular limitations of Humanism,” but not for the reasons he thinks. If in Stevens’ anti-humanist moods man is not the measure of all things—as he is, say, for Bertrand Russell or Jean-Paul Sartre—this is not because God, or some transcendent reality, is the measure. It is because, as he says in his commonplace book, he rejects the “premise” that “the universe is explicable only in terms of humanity.” Rather, “the indefinite, the impersonal, atmospheres and oceans and, above all, the principle of order are precisely what I love.” They are, he says, the “ultimate inamorata” (Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects [Stanford UP, 1989], 33).

Matthew Mutter
Yale University


In her book, Aristotle and Modernism: Aesthetic Affinities of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf, Edna Rosenthal takes on the ambitious project of reconciling the poetics of this diverse group of writers. Her approach, apparent from the title, is that despite the predominant view that Eliot, Stevens,
and Woolf occupy distinct positions in relation to modernism, their poetics are less oppositional than critics have understood. Rosenthal maintains that although their particular theoretical vocabularies differ, their poetic theory is commonly grounded in Aristotle, principally in his Poetics. Her aim, then, is “to expose the Aristotelian underpinnings of literary modernism” (1). In less than 150 pages, Rosenthal attempts to accomplish a great deal: she tries to redraw the contours of literary modernism and to uncover the “‘thicker’ historical and theoretical continuities” that bring these writers into conversation (6). The result is a study that, at times, opens up intriguing parallels in texts that we do not often examine together: Eliot’s literary-critical essays, Stevens’ poems and occasional prose, Woolf’s essays and Mrs. Dalloway.

Rosenthal compellingly argues that the fierce critical debates that dominated scholarship on the modernists in the 1980s have obscured the commonalities among them. She begins by providing an overview of the “theory wars” (4), and then proceeds to identify the Aristotelian principles that nevertheless unite Eliot, Stevens, and Woolf. An “objectivist approach to the work of art that centres on its affective qualities” is evident in the work of each writer (6). She further explains, “It is an aesthetic attitude in which artistic value is conceived in terms of the psychological and emotional experience occasioned by works of art” (6). Rosenthal acknowledges that to draw a direct line between their “formal affectivism” (7) and Aristotle’s Poetics is not an easy task, and she identifies the figures upon whom she relies to draw the line from Aristotle to the modernists: Butcher’s critical edition of the Poetics, Lessing’s Hamburg Dramaturgy, Longinus’ On Sublimity, and Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful. In the case of Stevens, she relies on the French symbolist influence to argue for his Aristotelian qualities. Rosenthal advances her argument in four chapters: the first two on Eliot and Stevens, respectively, and the third and fourth on Woolf.

By far, the most convincing of the chapters is the first, in which Rosenthal discusses Eliot and establishes the theoretical basis of her book. Drawing on Eliot’s essays—“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “The Perfect Critic,” “The Music of Poetry,” among many others—Rosenthal describes Eliot’s notion of a “classicist modernism” (39). Because Eliot’s project, she maintains, is a paradoxical one—“to create a new art” and “to reclaim classical standards” (16)—he turns to Aristotle in order to clarify his aims. Drawing on Lessing’s interpretation of the Poetics, she argues, Eliot both embraces the earlier writer’s notion of Aristotle as “not a lawgiver but the law” (17) and extends his “application of formal affectivism from tragic drama not only to modern poetry but to literary history as well” (16). Rosenthal sees a convergence in Lessing’s and Eliot’s work in the Aristotelian questions at the heart of their poetics. Both ask, as all Aristotelian critics do: “‘is this work well made?’ ‘what is the effect of this work?’ and, ‘how does this work produce this effect?’” (23). By so resituating these questions at the center of his “formal affectivism,” she credits Eliot with reviving Aristotle’s Poetics for twentieth-century poetry.

As Rosenthal herself admits, Virginia Woolf posits a more challenging case than Eliot to reconcile with Aristotle, and perhaps that is why she devotes two chapters to an examination of Woolf. To grasp the implicit Aristotelian
aesthetic in Woolf’s ideas about modern fiction, Rosenthal writes, first “entails a double historical shift—away from neoclassical emphasis on decorum to the exclusion of affect,” and then “away from the Romantic metaphysical emphasis on the poetic self to the exclusion of the work of art” (67). In chapter three, the author discusses Woolf’s understanding of the “novel as affective form” (68), and links her modernist fiction with Longinus’ and Burke’s conception of the sublime on the one hand, and, by way of Butcher, Aristotle’s “catharsis” on the other. Rosenthal’s most difficult premise concerning Woolf is that she asks us to see Woolf’s understanding of character in Aristotelian terms, which necessitates a more liberal reading of his notion of the relation between character (“ethos”) and plot (“mythos”). Although I still hesitate over her premise, the thoughtful reading of Mrs. Dalloway that Rosenthal offers in chapter four is the reward for taking such a leap.

Stevens presents the most “puzzling” (40) and complex figure of all for Rosenthal, both because critics place him at the center of the debates about the modernist canon and because of Stevens’ own assertions about his differences from Eliot. Yet, Rosenthal seeks to “uncover the Aristotelian features in the poetics of Wallace Stevens” and “to show that Stevens’ and Eliot’s post-symbolist poetics converge in an affectivist concept of art which, however you label it, is at its source Aristotelian” (41). Her chapter on Stevens is comprised of three sections: in the first, she provides an overview of the debates about Stevens’ place in the canon, retracing familiar ground; in the second, she locates Eliot’s and Stevens’ respective relationship with French symbolism as a path to their shared Aristotelian poetics; in the third, she discusses a number of poems—principally, “Anecdote of the Jar,” “Description Without Place,” “Of Modern Poetry,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—in order to demonstrate Stevens’ implicit Aristotelianism and to draw Eliot’s and Stevens’ poetics more closely together.

Rosenthal explains that she turns to the symbolists, in part, to help mediate the division in critical assessments about modernist poetics. She writes, “Since Stevens’ literary provenance, like Eliot’s, is widely (though not exclusively) recognized to be Symbolist, the attempt to clarify the Aristotelian assumptions of French Symbolism may provide the groundwork for understanding the aesthetic challenge they posed to their modernist followers and thus for comparing Eliot’s and Stevens’ poetics from a non-adversarial perspective” (47). Furthermore, she sees in the symbolists a meeting place for the divergent Aristotelian and Longinian streams of critical history. Rosenthal grounds her understanding of French symbolism in the figure of Mallarmé. In his call for “incantation and evocation” (48) over discursive language and description, in his understanding of the aesthetic unity of the poem, and in the reader’s response to and grasp of the essential mystery of poetry, she locates his Aristotelianism. Although their assessments of the symbolists differ (Eliot sees the end of the symbolist line in the voice of Valéry, and turns to the figures of Laforgue and Corbière for their aesthetic similarities to the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets, while Stevens, she maintains, transposes French symbolism to an American context), Rosenthal nevertheless asserts that their mutual acceptance of symbolist poetics “disclose[s] Aristotelian affinities that
significantly qualify their real and presumed differences: what is explicit in Eliot’s classicist modernism is tacitly accepted by Stevens and this is also the case vice versa to some extent” (53). In the readings of poems (and portions of poems) that follow, Rosenthal seeks to demonstrate her claim that we might illuminate Stevens’ poetry through an Aristotelian lens. “It is fairly evident that Stevens’ view of art as an act and principle of order presupposes the Aristotelian concept of the poet as the maker of a verbal object (poiesis), the aim and justification of which is aesthetic pleasure” (60). “Anecdote of the Jar,” Rosenthal writes, “illustrates Stevens’ playful revision of the Aristotelian distinction between Art and Nature” (60). In “Of Modern Poetry,” she sees Stevens’ Aristotelian “emphasis on aesthetic pleasure” (61), and in “Description Without Place,” she sees Stevens recasting Aristotle’s “‘mimesis’” in a post-symbolist mode (61).

Edna Rosenthal covers an enormous range of material in Aristotle and Modernism: Aesthetic Affinities of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf, and she prompts us to reexamine the critical terrain that has tended to separate our assessment of these three great writers. Although her focus on “formal affectivism” allows us to see the way Aristotle informs figures largely seen as divergent exemplars of modernism, her very general discussions of complex literary movements (such as French symbolism) and poems so rich as those of Stevens as illustrations of critical principles threaten to overcome the promise of her study. She would do well to remember that criticism illuminates poetry and not the other way around; however, her study does encourage us to rethink literary history in fresh ways.

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Karen Helgeson
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
A beautiful new edition — the first in nearly twenty years — of the work of Wallace Stevens. Edited and with an introduction by John N. Serio.

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